HOPALONG CASSIDY AND THE EAGLE'S BROOD

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FOREWORD

A LINE of frame buildings stood shoulder to shoulder along one side of the street. Before them lay the more unregenerate part of the town, its southern limits the river. Between the two, acting as a dead-line, were the railroad tracks. Back of Railroad Street sprawled the rest of the town, made up of two score or more private dwellings, several boarding houses, a frame schoolhouse of two rooms, a few scattered stores, and Boot Hill.

Boot Hill was well named. None of its inmates, sleeping the long sleep, had died with their boots off, except the one woman buried there. The flat topped hummock, rising perhaps sixty feet above the comparatively level prairie, was about an acre in extent on its top. There were no marble shafts to glisten in the sun, no granite to gleam gray or blue or brown and to mark it, at a distance, for what it was. A few twisted wooden crosses, but mostly straight boards where they remained standing, their penciled names already faded to match the color of the sun-bleached wood, stood drunkenly here and there. Weeds, half-grown before the drought and sun had killed them, made brown cicatrices on the gray-white earth. Empty bottles, a few empty cans, and odds and ends of litter added their note of hopelessness to the general air of forsakenness. Twisting, shallow gullies scored the steep slopes, showing where storm-water had raged furiously for a few moments before finding the peace of the lower levels; much the same as the moldering inmates of the hill had raged before they had found their peace.

Below Boot Hill, a quarter of a mile away, lay an orthodox square of ground, outlined by a white fence, criss-crossed by paths and set into small squares, like sections of a chessboard, each bearing rooks, bishops, and knights in marble and granite, the pretentiousness of each individual marker serving as an indicator to the importance of the surviving members of the family. Here lay those who had died in the approved fashion, with their boots off before the end; those who were not forgotten, so far as outward show was concerned; those who had not ridden in from nowhere to burst into flame and smoke for one heroic instant, and to go Nowhere.

Let us make Boot Hill our vantage point. From it we look across the rolling plain to a far horizon, eastward over the roofs of humble buildings; southward across the glistening lines of steel, the mercurial and turgid river with its low, perpendicular banks, its twin lines of rank vegetation, its twin rows of trees, and beyond to the tops of the rounded sandhills; westward, over the swelling rises and hollows of a gray-green sea of sparse grass not

yet hidden by alien weeds; northward the vista is much the same, barring a distant, faint line of greenery which marks the twisting course of a tributary stream.

The morning train which rumbled west was poorly attended in the matter of curious idlers at the station, and the stop at Bulltown was not one to engender memories or to mark the town; but the evening train, rumbling east, was another story. This eastern train was the favorite, and its stop was well attended. If personal feelings chanced to coincide with its arrival, shots might arouse the weary passengers, and they might even see, if they were fortunate, some quick duel on the street almost under their windows, and take home with them a vivid memory of frontier lawlessness. For the moment we will ignore the evening train, and turn to meet the westbound in cheery expectancy, for on it there will be persons in whom we have interest; and we now watch them come out of the smoking car, each carrying a sacked saddle, pause on the platform, and then move lazily across it and toward a faded shack which served as a hotel.

All hotels on Railroad Street gave over their lower floor to a bar and its accessories. This hotel is no exception, and we follow the strangers, noting that one of them limps a very little, and that the thin hair below his huge hat is a faded red. Having entered the lower story of the building, let us sluice the top layer of dust from our mouth and throat, seat ourselves in a far corner of the room, between two windows, and watch the newcomers and the doors. Somehow, instead of marking us as strangers, this double watchfulness will tend to indicate that we are not strangers, but thoroughly cognizant of the present surroundings, even though it is broad daylight. Boot Hill, behind us and north of the tracks, is full of those persons who became careless of doors, windows, and newcomers.

While we watch, let us consider our position geographically. Twin River is a far cry from Gunsight; McLeod a long way in miles from Los Altos; and Cottonwood Gulch is far enough away from McKenzie to arouse our comment, especially if we were to cover the distance on horseback. Yet an occasion arose when these six towns were to meet, in the persons of individual representatives, at one common center. That center was Bulltown, not to make use of its real name. The time was about even with the dying out of the Great Western Cattle Trail.

We have to consider the meeting of seven men, arranged by Fate, and to see what came of it. All came to Bulltown for reasons sufficient for the making of the journey. One wanted to buy cattle; another, to sell. Two of these seven came for the sake of friendship, after considerable misspelled

correspondence. One came again to taste the flavor of a hectic cowtown in the height of its convulsions, to sniff memories from the dust of that northbound trail, and on the off chance of meeting old friends up from Texas. One came hopelessly out of the West, from a land of arid plateaus and frowning mesas; from the accursed proximity of a great lava desert; from the scene of his loss, his heartbreak, and his failure.

Since the foregathering of these seven men make up our story, we will have done with forewords, and watch the doors—aye, and even the windows!

HOPALONG CASSIDY AND THE EAGLE'S BROOD

I

THE HOTEL clerk, deftly twirling the register with one hand, offered the freshly dipped pen with the other. The blank line having been forever ruined by the heavy scrawl, the book was whirled around again and the clerk put down a number. Glancing at the scrawl, his brows puckered while he struggled with it, and he bent down over it; and then he suddenly appeared to be hypnotized, for the letters seemed to be written in fire. He raised his head and looked with deference at the seamed, tanned face in front of him; and when he spoke it was with a curious reverence.

"I'm givin' you th' corner room, Mr. Cassidy," he said, swiftly changing the figure. "Number Six, sir; an' th' best in th' house!"

"Much obliged, Bub," said the puncher, stepping to one side and waving at the bulging sack on the floor as the bellboy showed signs of life.

Again the register twirled, stopping exactly in the right position for a right-handed man. Again a blank line was everlastingly defaced, and again a number was placed at the end of it. The clerk seemed to doubt his senses as he looked up.

"I'm givin' you Number Four, Mr. Saunders," he said, and nearly bowed as Mr. Saunders stepped back to make way for the third man.

The third man moved along the desk, irretrievably ruined the appearance of another line, and also stepped back; but his eyes had flashed to those other signatures, and now they flashed at the first man to sign. He saw that Mr. Saunders, also, was looking at the red-haired gentleman in the dusty black suit.

"Number Three for you, Mr. Skinner. I'm putting you three gentlemen on th' same floor, close together," said the clerk, handing out the third key. Then he glared at the bellboy, who had more ambition than good sense. This was shown by his fruitless attempt to carry three heavy stock saddles at once.

"Take up Number Six first!" ordered the clerk bruskly. "You can come back for th' others."

Mr. Cassidy brushed the boy aside and gripped the top of the sack.

"You play guide, Bub, an' let me do th' wranglin'," he said, smiling broadly.

The other two gentlemen nodded, and followed Mr. Cassidy's example; and the procession was forming when a shadow darkened the doorway and the town marshal stepped into the room from his customary beat for his customary scrutiny of the train's addition to the town's population. He stopped short, his mouth opening in surprise.

"Well, well, well!" he exclaimed, stepping forward with his hand extended. "Hopalong Cassidy, or I'm a liar! An' Dave Saunders! An' Matt Skinner! Durn if it ain't like old home week in Bulltown! How are you, boys? Man, but I'm shore glad to see you ag'in! How are you?"

He shook hands in turn, wrinkles of delight on his habitually cold, appraising face. "Heard that yo're th' new sheriff of Twin River, Hopalong! Matt, you old cow thief, somebody told me that yo're th' boss of a bang-up fine ranch! An' Dave, we've shore heard aplenty about you! You ain't aimin' to lynch nobody down here, are you? This ain't Cottonwood Gulch, an' I've got her fair peaceful."

"Glad to see you, Bat; right glad," said Hopalong, resting a kindly hand on the shoulder of a great peace officer. The fingers gripped the fabric of the black frock coat and bit into the flesh under it.

"I can give you a right good job punchin', Bat, at sixty a month an' found," chuckled Matt Skinner. "Blast yore ornery hide, but it's good to lay eyes on you ag'in!"

"Well, Bat," said the boss of Cottonwood Gulch, stepping back for a better look at the marshal, "if I start any lynchin' down here I'll shore start with you. Yo're a sight to cure sick eyes!"

The marshal took a step backward, so as to group his friends into a more compact picture.

"Well, this is great!" he said. "You boys know each other?"

"I've heard some gossip along th' trails," admitted Hopalong, with a broad grin. "I'd say Matt Skinner wasn't exactly a stranger to any of us; an' as for Saunders, he's about as famous west of th' Mississippi as General Grant."

"Grant is near a stranger in this country, compared to you, Cassidy," said Saunders, gripping the lean, hard hand. Handshaking became general, and the four men, forgetting the sacked saddles, their room assignments, and oblivious to the almost worshipping stares of clerk and bellboy, moved over to a row of chairs placed facing the big window. There are many times when Fate is kind, and to these men, this was one of them.

"Why, I came down here to meet Johnny—Johnny Nelson," the redhead was saying in answer to the marshal's question. "Last time I saw him was just after that Snake Buttes gang was cleaned out. He was purty well shot up then. He wrote up to me that he had some business to 'tend to here, an' he wanted to know why I couldn't come down an' meet him, for old time's sake. Tex is a-visitin' him—Tex Ewalt. Tex an' his wife kinda have to run a honeymoon every year—an' this year they're spendin' it on th' SV, with Margaret an' Johnny. There's another reason why they like th' SV, aside from Johnny an' his wife. Well, Tex is there; an' since Johnny is headin' this way, I wouldn't be a heap surprised if Tex sorta slipped away an' come with him."

"I'd shore like to meet th' pair of 'em," said Skinner, skipping along the high spots in his memory of what he had heard about them both. He glanced at his companions. "I came down here to sell some cattle, if you city boys don't rob me. We're doin' so well that our range is kinda gettin' crowded."

"Mebby we can do some business, Skinner," suggested Saunders, turning to the last speaker. "There's a new railroad goin' across th' country up my way, an' I've got thunderin' big beef contracts for feedin' its construction gangs. I got three sections to supply, an' it's got to th' point where I've got to buy before I can deliver, because that contract came right on top of some herds for delivery on th' open range. I wrote to a friend of mine, name of Duncan—Wyatt Duncan—an' he wrote back that he had some good critters to sell. I don't believe he can come anywhere near fillin' my needs. He'll come first, of course, seein' he was first come; but I'm right shore I can take a lot of head off yore hands, Matt, at a fair price to us both. What you say we wait till Duncan gets here, an' then talk it over three-cornered?"

"Wyatt Duncan," murmured Hopalong, thoughtfully. His mind was racing back and reviewing trail gossip. "He ain't that Wyatt Duncan that raised so much cain over in th' Black Buttes country, is he?"

"He shore is just that person," answered Saunders. "You heard of him, Skinner?"

"Yeah; I've heard about Duncan. He did a right good job over in th' Buttes. Say, Bat," he said, chuckling, "sizin' us up, an' figgerin' in them that are comin', we're goin' to be a right law-abidin' body of citizens, if you say it quick. There ain't one of us but what has had to clean up some part of th' country. Every one of us has been through some reg'lar little wars. Ain't that right?"

The marshal laughed.

"Yes; I was just thinkin' about th' same thing when you said it. Everythin' considered, there'll be a round half dozen of th' durnedest gun-throwin' hombres of th' West in this town, mebby to-night; an' I'm tellin' each one of you to keep on yore guns. If th' city fathers have got anythin' to say about it, I'll swear you all in as deputy city marshals to serve durin' yore stay, without pay. I figger if you boys wear 'em I won't have nothin' to do while yo're here. Man, even Quantrell's guerrillas in their best day would leave this town alone now!"

The day passed pleasantly enough. The three visitors made the rounds under the vouching of the town marshal. They visited old scenes and met a few old-time acquaintances; and in less than an hour the whole town knew who they were, and most of the town felt proud to offer its hospitality to such a trio.

In the evening the eastbound limited stopped at Bulltown, which was the end of a division. From the usual crowd heading for the depot, four men stepped out of the semi-darkness and loafed toward a baggage truck on the platform. As they stopped, there sounded far off in the west a pure, deep, vibrant tone. Soon a light appeared in the distance and glinted from the polished steel of the rails. The rails themselves seemed to waken. They hummed softly, and with a faint clicking told of distant wheels pounding over the rail joints. On she came, an imperious monster glaring with Cyclopean eye and breathing fire. The earth trembled, the rails clicked stridently and then, with hiss of steam, the whistle of air and a rush of cinder-filled wind, the long-tailed monster slid past the platform, slower and yet more slow. There came a grinding and squealing, a clash of brake chains, and the monster stopped, while various litter fluttered about the platform to settle slowly.

Lanterns swung down from car steps, and from the lighted door of the smoking car three men emerged, two of them talking and laughing.

"There he is!" called the foremost, raising an arm. "Hoppy! *Hey*, Hoppy!"

"Dang spavined old good-for-nothin'!" chuckled the second, hastily following his running companion.

The third man followed close to their heels, to meet and shake hands with his old friend from Cottonwood Gulch. Bat then took them all in charge and introductions followed. The seven men, bunched up, moved slowly from the platform, heading for the best saloon in town. They reached it, and passed in to line up against the bar.

Even from the rear they made a picture. Seven hewers of law and order, dressed in wool and leather and vast hats, Bat being the only exception to the last, for Bat wore a low-crowned derby, the last word in dog of that day. Seven hewers, their knees bending outward, their thighs hung with soiled scabbards, in which nestled walnut-handled arbiters of fate. Seven two-gun men, the cream of their various localities; seven men tested in flame and smoke and thundering stampedes; seven men without a flaw in courage. Stern and ruthless; yet kind and sympathetic; seven men who typified the better spirit of the old frontier.

II

THE SEVEN, having paid their respects to the bar, turned and sought the largest table, dragging up what chairs were necessary, and the magic circle was complete. Three of them talked cattle—age, weight, condition, numbers and prices. Duncan disposed of all he cared to sell, and Saunders's needs were rounded out by Skinner, whose selling urge was met and satisfied. Details and arrangements were agreed upon: the dates of the starting of the herds, the routes, and the dates of delivery. Honest men all, and vouched for by men of honor, they did business between themselves on honor.

On the other side of the table three old-time friends exchanged gossip and messages, reviewed past deeds and misdeeds, and questioned the future. Tex was doing well up near McKenzie and had bought into the ranch; Johnny Nelson had only praise and optimism for the SV and its future.

The marshal sat between the two groups, his smiling face turned first toward one and then toward the other. He dropped a word here and there in the conversations and joined in the occasional bursts of laughter; but mostly he was content to listen and to learn. At the top of his own profession and one of the most outstanding peace officers of the great, old-time West, he knew that on both sides of him were men who were his equal in every department of his own line of work. For them all he had a keen and friendly admiration; but for one of them admiration was hardly the word.

He looked closely at this one, studying the seamed, rugged face; the faded, thinned red hair; the squinting, cold eyes, the cold, blue eyes of the gunman. He was looking upon the peer of his friend Hickok in physical reactions, in speed and certainty of hand; but he was looking upon a man whose moral fiber was far above that of the famous gambler-gunman-marshal, who had been murdered not so many years before up in Deadwood. Hickok, suave, polished, meticulous in his appearance; this man, blunt, bluff, rough and almost slouching: the rapier and the mace.

A movement at the front door caught the marshal's eye, and he turned his head quickly as his hand dropped down, sensing that the conversation at the table had abruptly ceased.

A young man staggered into the room, headed for the nearest chair, and collapsed when within two steps of it. An outraged bellow from a bartender was checked by a warning, upflung arm, as the limping redhead, his chair crashing to the floor behind him, sprang forward, his friends at his heels. He

picked up the youth, carried him to the chair, and took the glass which Matt Skinner already had obtained. Empty, he handed it back again.

The youth was white of face, where dust and dirt and cinders would let the skin be seen. Blood streaked face and neck, and oozed from his torn and lacerated hands. His clothing, ripped and rent, was spotted with grime and dust. He was almost inert, but the second glass of liquor was beginning to have its effect. No one had seen the marshal's gesture or heard his whispered order, but in a remarkably short time one of the bartenders returned with a doctor. His practiced hands took charge of things. First he wanted room and breathing space: seven backs arched quickly, seven pairs of legs pushed against the floor: and the room and the breathing space was had.

"Looks like he's been dragged along th' railroad track," said the man of medicine to himself, but audibly. "Food's th' first thing he needs, an' not too fast or too plenty to start with. He's starvin', I'd say." He looked around the room, his eyes questing.

"Take him over to th' hotel, up to Number Six," said Hopalong with quiet authority. He turned to the marshal. "You ever seen him before, Bat?"

"No. He's not a bum," said Bat, stating the fact professionally.

"He needs food an' rest," said the doctor to the marshal. "His nerves are purty well shot, seems like. We'll put him to bed, an' he'll come 'round all right, I reckon."

The youth stirred, tears gathering in his eyes; tears of weakness, of despair, and of something else. He looked around slowly, scanning the circle of kindly faces.

"Don't bother with me," he mumbled. "Blow my head off, an' get it all over with. Get it all over with quick." He choked, and the tears fell unrestrained.

"Weak as blazes, all ripped to pieces," muttered the doctor. "Pick him up. I'll go along an' do what I can. Anyhow, I'll guarantee him a night's rest. It's all right, friend," he told the stranger, smiling down at him. "We're goin' to fix you up slick as a button."

Strong hands took hold of the youth, strong backs straightened. Matt Skinner picked a partly filled bottle from the bar, flinging a coin down in payment. It flipped back at him, and he nodded his apologies to the red-faced man behind the counter. Then he looked around curiously, and suddenly realized that two of his new friends were missing: Nelson and Ewalt. As he passed through the door he saw Nelson slip around the corner

of the building, and Ewalt moved forward out of the deeper darkness of a wall.

Skinner grunted, and smiled with sudden warmth: he was in durned good company. It looked like the stranger was in good and capable hands. He thought that Ewalt was slipping something into a holster, and his smile grew. He was glad that he had made the long and tiresome trip to Bulltown. Yes, sir, by gosh; he was glad he had come.

"You takin' liquor to th' hotel?" asked Ewalt, chuckling. "More coals to Newcastle," he grunted.

"Never been there," said Skinner; "but I'll bet you it won't be wasted. If there's any danger of that, I'll drink it myself." He was turning something over in his mind, and he suddenly looked at his companions. "You fellers ever been starvin'?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Ewalt in his throat.

"No," said Nelson, sharply.

"Well, *I* have," said Skinner. He made no further comment upon this subject, and it seemed that comment was not necessary. Their minds were given a new path for thought, and they paced along with him, silent and thoughtful.

"Looked to me like he's been manhandled," said Nelson. He turned to Ewalt, who once had studied medicine. "You reckon he was dragged from a train?"

"Yes; looked that way," replied Tex, thoughtfully. For a moment he was silent, and then spoke again. "We'll get him on his feet, chip in, an' send him on his way rejoicin'." Strange emotions were playing through him, strange for a once cold-blooded professional gambler. If someone had only stepped forward in his extremity in the days of his youth what might have been spared to him!

They stopped in the hotel office, just inside the door, waiting. The stairs creaked steadily and regularly, and Dave Saunders came into sight, from the feet upward. He joined the little group in the doorway, his eyes on the bottle in Skinner's hand.

"They got one of those upstairs," he said, holding out his hand. "Might as well empty yourn, here an' now." He took the bottle, drank deeply, and passed it on to the next man, wiping his mouth on the back of a hand. "I've heard just about enough, an' seen about enough in th' last few minutes to appreciate that drink. What I saw is enough to last me the rest of my life. Dead wife, stolen cattle—blast such a world!"

"Dead wife?" asked Johnny.

"Blowed all to pieces with a six-shooter," said Saunders, his voice a growl. "Let's go sit down an' wait for th' boys. It don't look like I'll be headin' straight for home, like I figgered on." His face was like a thundercloud: dark, with threatening patches of white that came and went.

"Meanin' th' Kid's wife was murdered?" asked Skinner, holding the bottle up to the light and idly speculating upon how many drinks remained in it. It looked like there were at least two good ones.

"Mowed right down!" snapped Saunders. "Th' killin' was th' most decent, most merciful part of it! There's a gang out in th' Kid's part of th' country that's a stench on th' face of th' earth. No sir, I *ain't* goin' straight home!"

Skinner was cursed by a vivid imagination, and he forthwith emptied the bottle and placed it on the floor near his chair.

"What's th' doc say?" he asked. "About th' shape th' Kid's in?"

"He said he would get along a durn sight better if he had th' wish to get well. Cassidy's got th' first trick to-night. Here comes th' others now."

The doctor, followed closely by Duncan, joined the seated group.

"Food an' rest—they're easy to give him," he said, a scowl on his face. "What he needs more than anythin' else is a brand new spirit; an' that ain't easy to acquire. He wasn't dragged along th' railroad track: he was just kicked off th' eastbound limited to-night, an' rolled along th' track. Few miles west of town, beyond th' cattle crossin'. How he ever got here, I don't know. Bruised, cut, scraped; shocked, starved, wants to die, an' can't. I'll drop in to-morrow an' look him over. An' I'll ante up right now to make a jackpot to pay somebody to kill that —— —— brakeman! Good-night, gentlemen!"

They watched the indignant medical gentleman stalk from the room, his chin out and his shoulders high, with a chip on each of them; and then Wyatt Duncan glanced at the stairs.

"Bat's talkin' it over with Cassidy," he said. "He'll soon be down. Speakin' of jackpots an' killin' somebody, I'm almost tempted——" he broke off suddenly and reached for tobacco and papers. His expression was not a pleasant thing to look upon.

"Yieldin' to temptation is th' easiest thing I do," muttered Matt Skinner, his imagination at work again.

Saunders, his face still dark with anger, was looking at Duncan with great intentness, and then he glanced curiously at the last speaker, and gravely nodded his head.

"Boys," he said, breaking the silence, "as I reckon it, our little cattle deals are all done. If we had to, we could leave open th' dates for th' startin' an' delivery of th' herds. Like Wyatt, here, I too am almost tempted; an' like Skinner, I'm a willin' yielder. We'll see what Cassidy has to say."

Nelson toyed absent-mindedly with a weighted holster, caressing it; while Ewalt sat quietly in his chair, hands on thighs, his gambler's face cold and calculating.

Nelson stirred, looked around, and spoke.

"I can make a right good guess what he'll say. I've lived with him too many years not to know *that*!"

Ewalt nodded and permitted the suggestion of a smile to flit across his face.

"Yes," he said, complacently. "So can I. Well, I ain't got no pressin' business, an' my wife's a thoroughbred. We're right happy, married: an' when I tell her—oh, well: as I said, I got no pressin' business."

"Nor me!" snapped Saunders, his eyes blazing.

"I was allus a great hand to travel," said Skinner. He looked up as the stairs squeaked, and the marshal slowly stepped into sight. "I *allus* was," he reiterated.

Bat nodded to the group and sank gratefully into a chair, finding all eyes upon him.

"Cassidy's holdin' a war dance by hisself," he said, placing his precious derby on one knee. "It might be a good idear for you boys to start tyin' some scalp loops, in case you need 'em. There's blood on th' moon."

Nelson laughed suddenly. It was almost like a bark.

"I knew it!" he exclaimed. "I *knew* it!"

Ewalt looked at the clock, and figured a moment.

"Nine o'clock," he said. "Breakfast at seven. That's ten hours. There's five of us, down here. That's two hours each. Let's draw straws for our turns upstairs."

He took five matches out of his pocket, and broke them into different lengths. Closing his hand over them with their heads protruding, he held them out.

"Shortest takes th' next shift, an' so on," he said.

Nelson drew one, and held it in sight while the others took their turns. Comparing them, they accepted the verdict. Duncan felt to see that he had plenty of tobacco, nodded to his companions and walked to the stairs. A few minutes later Cassidy came down, moved slowly toward the silent group, and seated himself. His face was set and forbidding, and his blue eyes smoldered with anger. The others remained silent, waiting for him to speak.

"You boys feel like listenin' to a story?" he finally asked, glancing around the circle, and quiet nods answered him.

"Johnny," he said, "I'm headin' West, with both guns oiled an' my tail straight up. I've got some names an' descriptions, an' I'm figgerin' to put a period after each one. I'm foot-loose, a free agent, an' I'm shore goin' skunk-killin'."

He sighed, dropped his hat down at the side of his chair, waited a moment and then continued, unfolding to the waiting ears of his companions a story so horrible that the youngest of them blenched. Yet Cassidy told it, all at once, in a flat, monotonous voice. A story of doors broken in at dead of night—the rush of an overwhelming masked mob—the screams of a young wife tortured to death while the youthful husband prayed and cursed and struggled vainly against the strong ropes that bound him.

Such a tale told to such men needed no prop of oratory. Long before he had finished, his audience squirmed; and when he had finished, and his big hands dropped unconsciously to the heavy guns on his thighs, he saw other hands as unconsciously repeat the motion. With the last word he leaned back in his chair and let his eyes move questingly from face to face.

Skinner cleared his throat raspingly, and felt a little ashamed of himself.

"Every passin' year finds me yieldin' easier," he said. "Now I got to write a letter home. I didn't figger to stay away so long." He arose apologetically and walked toward a table, on which were writing materials.

"I allus hated to write letters," admitted Saunders, slowly getting to his feet and glancing at the table. "That reminds me that there's a telegraph line runnin' to th' Gulch, an' that there's a friend in th' Gulch to ride out to th' ranch. Only wish I'd brought my rifle along. Oh, well: I need a new one, anyhow."

Nelson cleared his throat.

"There's rifles an' other things on th' SV," he said, apropos of nothing. "There's an old Sharps buffalo gun there, too, that belongs to Hopalong. You remember it, Hoppy?"

"Shore do! I never should have forgot it, Kid. It's better than my new one."

Ewalt nodded, and let a thin smile play across his lean, tanned face.

"All of which means that you an' me, Johnny, can take our own news in person," he said. "I reckoned that you'd figger out some way to get out of writin' a letter. Margaret an' Jane can keep each other company, an' that's a right good thing. We've got th' luck with us *so* far."

Hopalong was looking from one to another in a mild surprise. The coldness went out of his face, and his eyes kindled. A little thrill went through him, engendered by the thought that some of the old breed still lived.

The marshal, ensconced comfortably in his easy chair, was looking from man to man, also appraising them. This was no mere outfit, for every one of them was a leader, possessing initiative; every one was an expert with six-shooter and rifle, everyone a plainsman. His glance passed on to the veteran and rested there, on the man whose fame had spread from the frontier to the coast, from the north line to that of the south. An old eagle, he was: swift, certain, ruthless when aroused; master of strategy and warfare, tempered and ground and honed in more than thirty years of conflict against lawlessness. An old eagle; aye, and here was an eagle's brood!

III

BREAKFAST WAS a silent affair, and when it was over the group returned to the chairs in front of the big window. The marshal joined them, a toothpick projecting from under his jet-black mustache. He was about to seat himself when the doctor appeared.

"Everythin's goin' well," reported the gentleman of medicine. "I was afraid of somethin' bein' wrong inside of him. Bein' throwed off of a movin' train ain't what you might call healthy. Then there was th' dirt in all them cuts an' gashes; but they look right good now. It's goin' to take time, though, to get back his strength. Couple of weeks, I'd say. I'm tellin' you boys that that kid has had one heck of a session; an' he wasn't none too strong to begin with."

"Two weeks!" growled Hopalong, shaking his head in stubborn disagreement with any such interval.

"Yes, two weeks," replied the doctor, turning to the grumbler.

"I wasn't questionin' th' time from yore point of view," said Hopalong, "but from mine."

Bat flipped the toothpick toward a sandbox cuspidor and nodded reassuringly to his old friend. There was a knowing smile on his face.

"I'll see that he's taken care of, if you boys want to go on about yore business," he said quietly. "I'll pass th' hat around th' poker tables an' get him a real stake. This town shells out free an' easy. He was headin' east, back to th' part of th' country where he was born an' raised. Th' question is, which way should he go after he gets able to travel?"

"West," growled Cassidy. "Back to th' place he just left unless I send you word to send him somewhere else. Come to think of it, that's somethin' that can't be decided now. Reckon mebby he don't never want to see that place ag'in: *I* wouldn't. You send him on east, Bat, if you don't hear from us by th' time he's able to travel. I don't know what kind of a layout he had; mebby it ain't worth goin' back to. He won't have no cattle left, anyhow."

Skinner had been fidgeting and now he took quick advantage of the pause in the talk.

"No need to pass no hat, Bat," he said with the hesitation common to men who like to deprecate their good deeds. "I reckon none of us are paupers."

"No," said Saunders, decisively, sensing the drift. "*We*'ll pass th' hat, an' pass it now. It's a sorta family affair, I reckon."

"Can't have that," objected Bat, and meaning it. "I can't go with you, but I aim to do my share; an' Bulltown aims to do hers. Th' boys will take care of that kid, an' that's flat."

Bat exchanged a few words with the doctor on the way to the door, and returned alone. He dropped into his chair, hung the precious derby carefully on a knee, and looked around.

"Seems to me there oughta be a head to any kind of an expedition," he suggested.

"Saunders is a good man to take hold of this," said Cassidy, swiftly reviewing what he had heard of the vigilante days of Cottonwood Gulch.

"Be too much like a pupil instructin' his teacher," said Saunders, chuckling. "I don't know how th' rest of th' boys feel about it, but by age, experience, an' general cussedness I'd say that Hopalong Cassidy was boss of this young an' self-supportin' outfit. That's my honest opinion."

"Right," said Duncan, smiling as he settled back in his chair.

"It'll mebby give us all a chance to learn somethin' worth while," remarked Skinner, his face beaming. "I string along with Saunders, an' vote for Cassidy."

The affirmations were explosive and sincere, and the question seemed to be settled.

"I reckon it don't matter so much who is foreman of *this* outfit," said Hopalong thoughtfully. "Every man here is big enough for th' job. Th' main thing is obedience to whoever is foreman. I'm just as ready to follow as to lead. If I follow, I'll do what I'm told to do; if I lead, I expect every one of you to do th' same. We'll likely have trouble enough from th' outside without needin' any bickerin' among ourselves. Just to make that real plain, an' mebby save some arguments later, we'll hold th' election over ag'in, on that footin'. First: are we all agreed to do what th' boss tells us to do? To do it quick, without grumblin' or arguin'?"

Nods of affirmation answered him and he put full faith in them as he, himself, nodded.

"All right," he said, smiling thinly. "Now we'll pick our leader. I name Saunders ag'in for my choice."

"An' I'm repeatin' what I said before," remarked Dave Saunders, smiling. "I vote for Cassidy."

"Make mine th' same," said Wyatt Duncan, nodding swiftly.

"I'm stringin' along with Dave an' Wyatt," said Skinner, and the others made it unanimous.

"Don't see how you can get out of it, Hoppy, after what you just said," said Tex Ewalt, chuckling. "We've all said we'd take orders, an' we've elected you boss."

Hopalong nodded without enthusiasm, and looked slowly from man to man.

"All right; I'll go through with my end of it," he said. "But any time th' majority figgers that we need a new boss, we'll hold another election. First, I want to talk to that kid ag'in, an' learn all that he can tell me. He's beginnin' to talk easier—gettin' a little more confidence in us, I reckon. We'll leave town just as soon as we can; but there ain't no sense of wastin' time. Johnny, you an' Tex hop th' first train west, an' get everythin' ready for us on th' SV."

"Highbank is my railroad station," said Johnny. "If we take to th' hosses at th' ranch we'll have hundreds of miles to ride on them, when we might just as well cover that distance by rail. Suppose me an' Tex get rifles, blankets, an' things like that, pile 'em on th' platform of th' railroad station, an' climb aboard when yore train comes along? We can get th' hosses where we leave th' train. How does that look to you, Hoppy?"

"Th' same as it does to you," replied the leader, his face crinkled with a smile. "I figger that we'll take th' limited in th' mornin'. Seems to me that there's a slow train west this afternoon. Is that right, Bat?"

"Yes; there's an accommodation—we call it th' dog train. Leaves at one-twelve this afternoon. It's a local as far as Wickiup; an' then runs th' whole night through without a stop."

"That's ours," said Johnny, and Tex nodded.

Hopalong turned to the marshal.

"Bat, you said somethin' about knowin' that country, out where th' Kid came from. Suppose you tell us about it?"

"I know a town that ain't so very far away from it, an' I know th' name of th' sheriff that lives in that town. It's in Cactus County, an' only last week that sheriff telegraphed here for us to keep our eyes open for any BHB cattle that came east along th' old wagon trail. His name is Corson, an' he ranches near Willow Springs. I'd figger that yore best play would be to hunt him up an' get him talkin'. Shall I wire him to expect you?"

"Yes; but you'll have to tell him to expect us when he sees us," replied Hopalong. He got up. "I'm goin' upstairs to talk some more with th' Kid."

"I'll go down to th' station an' send that telegram to Corson," Bat said. "If there is any answer that you ought to have, I'll forward to any place Nelson tells me to."

"Good," grunted the leader, heading for the stairs.

"Send it to Highbank, Bat," said Johnny, thoughtfully. "Send it there if it comes in th' next two days. We'll get it."

"All right, Johnny. See you boys later," said the marshal, and left the room.

The afternoon train came and went, and with it went Ewalt and Nelson, making the first move in the campaign of skunk-killing. Their friends, watching the dust-wrapped end of the last car until it grew small, turned and walked back to the hotel, and there found Bat and Hopalong intently studying a map spread out on the card table.

"I'll have to find out about that," Bat was saying, frowning at a point marked by his finger. "Old Jackson will be in town to-night—if somebody ain't shot him for hoss-stealin'. He used to travel out that way, an' I reckon he knows th' country; but if he ever got quite that far south an' west, I don't know. Anyhow, he can tell you th' best way to get to Corson's town, if he will."

"Water an' grass," muttered Hopalong, thinking out loud. "Nothin' else matters very much."

"Shore," agreed Bat, nodding. "You may have to stick to th' reg'lar trails to be shore of water an' grass, even if they are kinda roundabout. Well, old Jackson will know about that, I reckon."

Old Jackson did, when they found him after supper. He looked frankly suspicious, swiftly reviewed his past, and then smiled with a certain amount of restraint. He was the best lone-hand horse thief for hundreds of miles around; he was the best because he never had been caught, although the activities toward that end had been unstinted and almost unceasing. Everybody suspected him, but nobody could prove anything at all against him.

"Whar's yore map?" he asked, his eyes alertly on the group, but his words addressed to the marshal. He watched it unfold, and helped to smooth it out on the bar. His grimy finger moved swiftly along certain faint lines.

"Thar's th' reg'lar way—th' old stage-coach routes; an' here's another, used by some of th' government explorin' expeditions, an' quite some

shorter than th' stage routes; but," he said, pausing to look into the interested faces around him, "thar's another way that's shorter yet, if you know it. Ten years ago I woudn't 'a' told you a word about it—but I ain't goin' back into that country no more. Them days are over, for me."

He looked around at a bartender.

"Gimme a pencil, Billy," he ordered.

Saunders relayed it and handed it to the old horse thief.

"Thar," said old Jackson, bearing down with untrained hand, and drawing a line that twisted and turned, here and there marking heavy black X's. "Thar! Them's camp spots, them X's—water an' grass," he explained. "If you'll listen, I'll tell you all about this route," and for the next half-hour his drawling voice held his companions' attention. Then came a shorter period of questions and answers, and finally, pushing his disreputable hat far back on his frowsy head, old Jackson wiped his lips with the back of a hand, and flatly announced a fact.

"I'm right thirsty," he said, meaningly, and not long thereafter he left the building with almost a capacity load of liquor under his belt, and with a substantial addition to his cash in pocket.

Bat led the way toward a table, but caught sight of a man just coming in through the door. The marshal swung abruptly on his heels and went to meet the newcomer. After a few low-voiced words the newcomer dug down into a pocket and handed the peace officer something that clinked. Bat nodded, turned, and went back to the table, a satisfied smile on his face.

"That makes th' five hundred, even," he said proudly.

IV

THE LONG, skinny deputy who wore a shining badge regarded the six riders with a close interest, for their rigs suggested visitors from another part of the country; and for two days he had been waiting to welcome expected visitors. He pushed out from the wall, stuck his head in at the door, and said something; and thereupon Bob Corson, sheriff of Cactus County, stepped to the street. The two officers studied the leader of the cavalcade, nodded triumphantly to each other, and grinned their welcome as the cavalcade stopped.

"Glad to see you, Cassidy, an' all you boys," said the sheriff, conscious that men were stepping to the street from every building in the town. The fame of these riders had gone on before them.

"Glad to get here, an' to see you, Sheriff," said the leader.

"What you say about washin' down some of th' dust, an' then head out for th' ranch? Or, mebby, you'd rather stay here in town?" said the sheriff.

"It ain't fair to dump this hungry gang onto no willin' host," replied Hopalong, chuckling. "But before we go any farther, Mr. Corson, let me name th' boys," and the introductions were duly performed.

"I didn't know for shore if you was real," Matt Skinner was saying to Nueces, the long, skinny deputy. "You shore didn't cast no shadow."

"That's because I was a-standin' edgeways to th' sun," chuckled Nueces, owning to a sudden liking for this free-handed insulter of deputies. "Listen! I just heard Steve pull out a cork; let's go an' take a look!"

They did, and Steve became a little flustered by the line-up at his humble bar; but he slid three bottles to their fate and let his customers look after themselves. As he shook hands with each man in turn he felt that he was in the presence of cow-country nobility; but he fully recovered the use of his faculties when Corson slid a gold piece toward him across the counter.

"Ain't you got no sense a-tall?" demanded Steve, sliding it back again. "They're on th' house! Gents, I welcome you to Willer Springs. Here's that yore sins never get found out!" and he raised a glass to lead in the ritual.

"Keno!" said Hopalong. "I've kept mine well hid, so far."

The conversation became general, and round followed round; but Steve noticed that the strangers, and Corson and Nueces as well, were careful not to cover the bottoms of the glasses too deeply.

". . . eat you out of house an' home," Hopalong was protesting.

"But we got a round-up cook," replied Corson. "He don't scare at nothin' short of a regiment; and, besides, he's been makin' a lot of fancy fixin's. I reckon he might feel a little put out if you boys don't eat 'em."

"Then I don't see how I can stick it out ag'in you any longer," said Hopalong. "I'd feel th' same way if things was turned around. Well," he said, turning to face his companions, "you boys ready to drift along?"

They were, and they did.

The next day found the talk settling down to the real business of the visit, a talk open to any man on the ranch who cared to listen or to take part. It seemed that the marshal of Bulltown had been somewhat detailed in his correspondence with Willow Springs, for the local sheriff had anticipated several contingencies. Proof of this developed after supper on the second night, when the sounds of a walking horse neared the bunkhouse and ceased just outside the door.

In a moment a splendid example of Mexican manhood, dressed in the height of fashion, stepped into the big room, and removed his sombrero with a flourish. His bearing was that of a prince of royal blood.

"Eet ees my pleasure to come en person, Señor Corson," he said, his white teeth gleaming under his trim mustache.

"Why, that's downright kind of you, Señor Chavez," exclaimed the owner of the JC and the sheriff of the county. He leaped to his feet and extended a hand. "I expected to send my friends to you."

"Then I would have been honor', señor; but I thought eet best to talk fir-rst her-re. No one saw me ride. No one knows. There ees no, what you call —leenk?—to cause regret later, no?"

"Gentlemen," said Corson, smiling around the room, "let me make you all acquainted with Señor Chavez, who has ridden up here from Old Mexico to aid us in deciding some points, if he can. Señor, this is Hopalong Cassidy."

The Mexican did not raise a hand while he looked into the faded blue eyes, or while he spoke.

"Señor Cassi-day, I hav' heard many theengs of you; ver' many, endeed. Some I liked; some, not; but I have never hear-rd that you ar-re not a man and a gentleman. Weel you honor me weeth your hand?"

Hopalong was looking closely at the speaker, and now he slowly extended his hand.

"Every man is entitled to his own opinion," he said, quietly. "We can't all figger things alike."

"Dave Saunders," said Corson, turning to the Cottonwood Gulch man.

"I am honor' to know you, señor," said the Mexican, bowing.

"Tex Ewalt," continued Corson, his smile growing.

"Hah! Do you know, Señor Ewalt, I once met a man who sat all day weeth the pack of car-rds. He e-shuffle, cut; e-shuffle, cut—all day. At the end of a week I ask heem; 'What you do all day weeth those fool car-rds?' You would laugh, Señor Ewalt. He say: 'To be like Tex Ewalt.' I say to heem: 'You are a fool: Tex Ewalt, he was bor-rn weeth a geeft. Eet ees not to be acquire'. I am honor', señor, to e-shake your hand."

"Th' honor runs both ways, Señor Chavez," said Tex, laughing heartily.

"Matt Skinner, señor," chuckled Corson, turning to another of the group. The sheriff was very much relieved, for things were going smoother than he thought: to introduce a first-class cattle thief to men like these—well, they didn't know it yet.

"I am beatin' you to it, Señor Chavez," said Matt, holding out his big, bony hand. "You've never heard of me."

"Then I can onlee ask you, ees Baldy well?" replied the Mexican, grasping the outheld hand.

"I'll be durned! You win!"

"Meet Wyatt Duncan, señor," said Corson, laughing outright. He was surprised, although he knew that if he had heard of these men, there was no reason why the Mexican should not have heard as much. As a matter of fact, remembering the Mexican's organization, Señor Chavez might well know more than he did.

"Bet you ten, even money, you never heard of me," said Wyatt, extending his hand.

"Shall we ask my fr-riend to hold the e-stakes, Señor Duncan; my fr-riend who once leeved near the Black Buttes?"

All eyes were now on this Mexican, frankly and suspiciously on him; but he gave no sign that he was conscious of it. He could have spoken of Saunders's activities had he wished, far away as they had been; but he was a bandit, and found vigilante activities distasteful. He followed Corson's gesture and bowed as the last name was mentioned.

"I am glad to meet weeth you, Señor Nelson. I onderstand that the Snake Buttes ar-re ver' tame."

"Thanks to my friends," said Johnny, shaking hands.

When all were seated again, Corson looked around the circle and let his gaze rest on Hopalong.

"Th' Bulltown marshal told me quite a lot, Cassidy," he said, slowly and thoughtfully. "From it I have been able to make a pretty shrewd guess why you boys are in this part of th' country. In sympathy I am with you; but, as that section is well out of my jurisdiction, I cannot join you, officially and in person. You wanted directions, an' what information I could get. That right?"

Nods and grunts of affirmation answered him.

"I reckon so," he continued. "But there is another side to th' matter. You are concerned only in one definite affair: finding just one gang of cut-throats, and nothin' else. That right?"

"You've put a name to it," said Hopalong. "Just one gang, an' nobody or nothin' else."

"Then, if you should run up against other people, who are not connected with yore gang a-tall, an' they let you alone, you will let them alone?"

"Shore: why not?" replied Hopalong. "What has all this got to do with us?"

"Quite a lot, Cassidy; quite a lot," answered his host, with a glance at the Mexican. "Th' Bulltown marshal says you are after Big Henry's gang. I'm right glad that somebody wants 'em bad enough to go in after 'em. But you don't want El Toro's crowd, do you?"

"Who's he?" asked Hopalong, curiously.

"He ees not so well known as you, señor," said Chavez, smiling.

"Heck he ain't!" snapped Johnny, leaning forward in his chair. "He's that ____"

"Excuse me, Nelson!" interrupted Corson hurriedly. "Let's not say anythin' about persons that don't touch this present matter. You boys want Big Henry an' his gang. You don't want nobody else. Let's have that understood before we go on. Am I right?"

"Yes. Nobody else counts with us," replied Hopalong, beginning to find a good and sufficient reason for Corson's attitude. He glanced out of the corner of his eye at the Mexican, just a flash glance, and then he was regarding Corson steadily. "We'll pass you our word on that, Corson; eh, boys?"

Affirmations answered him, and Corson sat back with a gentle sigh of relief.

"Good," he said, and turned toward the Mexican. "Señor Chavez will talk from now on."

"I theenk I know the theeng that you ar-re interest' in," said Chavez. "Eet ees a theeng that I deed not like. Eet was so—so on-necessary. I e-spik for Señor El Toro. Eef you do not bother heem, who had notheeng to do weeth that r-rottenness, weeth w'at happened, then you may do w'at you weesh weeth Beeg Henry. That ees a bar-rgain, señores?"

"We've already said it was," replied Hopalong.

"Ah, yes; so you deed; so you deed," admitted the Mexican, bowing. "Eef you weel do me the honor to leesten, I weel teel you the standing of matters een that par-rt of the countr-ry. Eet ees emportant that you should know of thees."

"Th' more we know, th' better off we are," admitted Hopalong.

"That ees so," said Chavez, and he looked around the circle of faces, smiling at each in turn.

"Señor El Toro," he continued, placidly, "ees a Mexican bandit, hees hand against hees bastar-rd government. He must leeve, an' hees men, they must leeve. Hees hand eet r-reaches out over a gr-reat section of the countr-ry. Een that countr-ry he ees w'at you call boss. But ther-re ar-re par-rts of eet een wheech he has small interest. Beeg Henr-ry ees een that par-rt.

"Beeg Henr-ry, he knows hees beans, as you say. So he sends wor-rd to El Toro weeth a beezeness proposition. There ees a line he weel not cross. Ther-re ees a sum of money he weel pay. He weel not meddle weeth El Toro's affairs; El Toro weel not meddle weeth Beeg Henr-ry's. They both agree on that. They ar-re not friends, and they ar-re not enemies. Beeg Henr-ry ees an Americano; all hees men ar-re Americanos. El Toro ees a Mexican, an' all hees men they ar-re Mexicans. Ther-re weel be no confusion; each side ees marked by the good God; each side, by eets race. Thees ees plain, señores?"

More nods and grunts of affirmation answered him.

"Eef you fight weeth Beeg Henr-ry, eet ees not El Toro's fight: he ees not for you, or against you—openly. But eet steeks een hees craw, as you say, that theeng Beeg Henr-ry did, he and hees men. *Madre de Dios!* How eeny man could do such a devil theeng——"

"We know how—but not why," cut in Cassidy shortly. "There was something back of it, certainly—no man, except perhaps an Apache, would

torture a woman like that. There was something they were trying to find out. What it was, even the Kid didn't know. If we get our hands on Big Henry, though, we'll find out." There was a cold merciless light in Hopalong's eyes that brought a nod of admiration from the Mexican.

"*Bueno.* Eet was one devil theeng—the devil mus' pay. Though that countr-ry ees El Toro's countr-ry, you geeve heem your word that you make no tr-rouble for Mexicans—and eet ees yours to do weeth as you weesh."

"We shore won't make any trouble for Mexicans," said Hopalong, thoughtfully, "unless, of course, they make trouble for us. They will set th' pace in that. But how do we know that perhaps one of El Toro's men ain't right friendly, ag'in strangers, with Big Henry? Men have been bribed before, or have taken sides for other reasons."

"Hah!" exclaimed Señor Chavez, his eyes blazing momentarily. "Eef you should find one such, and know eet ees tr-rue, then eef you e-shoot heem, you save El Toro from doing eet heemself; but eef you should find such a man, an' do e-shoot heem, then you send wor-rd to El Toro of w'at you deed, an' why. No?"

"I'm durned if I can see why we've got to bargain an' truckle——" began Hopalong, but he was checked.

"Just a minute, Cassidy," broke in Corson quickly, almost panicky. "That is somethin' that we will discuss later. I can assure you, however, that there's a right good reason for it; an' that it won't leave a bad taste in yore mouth when you learn it."

"Well, all right," grudged Hopalong slowly. "You know this part of th' country better than we do. We'll string along with you, an' we shore are obliged to you for what you've done."

Señor Chavez arose, bowed slightly, said a few polite words of regret at the parting, and stepped through the door, Corson following him. In a moment he had ridden off, and Corson returned to find a curious silence in the bunkhouse.

"Now, then," said Hopalong, breaking the silence. "He's gone, an' we can't hurt his feelin's. You might tell us, now, why we've got to truckle with a Mexican bandit?"

Corson leaned against the door casing and answered him, and the crowd sat on the edges of the chairs before he had finished. Every man present could appreciate fairness and courage and friendliness; and when the tale was told, every man there was ready not only to truckle with that particular Mexican bandit, but to keep his word to the very last letter of it.

V

NUECES DREW rein at the edge of the lava desert, his companions following suit and bunching around him.

"I've never been farther than this," admitted the horse-faced deputy, looking out over the forbidding and grotesque stretch of rock and sand, with its gray-green vegetation and thrusting cacti. "Never had no need to," he grunted.

"Sorry we have," said somebody behind him.

"Somewhere near th' middle of this devil's playground," continued Nueces, "is a town, an outlaw town, without an honest man in it. Up north it's Jackson's Hole; down here, Hell's Center. There are several ways in to it, if you know 'em: I don't."

The group sat motionless, each man looking out over the desolate prospect; and a prospect more desolate than a lava desert is difficult to imagine.

"We'll go to th' water hole, an' stay there till mornin'," said Nueces, gesturing with his left hand. "It's a right good place, an' th' water is good."

In a moment the cavalcade was under way again, riding slowly and silently, and when it stopped it had reached Tinaja Verde, the only known potable water for eighty miles of riding north and south. The water oozed out of a stratum of rock and was sweet and cool.

The deserts of high altitudes, once the sun goes down, cool rapidly; a brisk, sputtering fire baffled the darkness of the desert night and gave a grateful warmth to the circle of men seated closely around it. Two of their number were missing, standing guard somewhere out in the darkness, stolidly waiting their turn at the fire and blankets. Grotesque shadows loomed on the rock wall, and the reflection of the fire on the rock could be seen for a fair distance.

"Who comes? *Quien es?*" rang out a challenge from the north, and the circle at the fire stirred and became alert.

"*Amigo.* Fr-riend," sounded the instant answer.

"Then head for th' fire, an' keep in my sight till you get there," ordered the sentry, moving so that the newcomer stood silhouetted against the distant light.

"*Si, si, señor*; I onderstand."

The Mexican advanced into the circle of light, his white teeth shining in a friendly smile. "Ah, Señor Nueces! I am glad to fin' you so soon."

"Hello, Felipe! There was only one place to look for me. You headin' for San Ignacio?" asked Nueces, motioning for the visitor to seat himself in the circle, and looking at his complacent friends. "This is Felipe," he explained. "He's El Toro's eyes an' ears. I can vouch for him. Sit down, *amigo*."

"*Gracias*," replied Felipe, sitting cross-legged in the space provided for him. "Yes, I go to San Ignacio." He reached out, replaced a fallen stem on the fire, and smiled again. "Eet ees pleasant to have company for the night. I deed not expect eet." He winked gravely at his friend, the deputy.

Nueces chuckled.

"Just kinda went for a little hossback ride, an' first thing you knowed, here you was?" suggested the horse-faced deputy, chuckling again.

"*Si, señor*," said Felipe with a laugh. He produced a corn husk and some loose tobacco from a pocket and his fingers became busy.

"Curious layout, this desert," observed Hopalong, his eyes on the lithe, brown-skinned guest.

"*Si, señor*; eet ees ver' curious."

"You ever cross it?"

"*Si, si*: many time. I deed not car-re, mooch."

"Reckon not," replied Hopalong. "Cross it from different directions?" he persisted, carelessly.

"*Si, si*; but most fr-rom the south."

"Any water holes on it?" drawled Skinner, getting the drift of the questions.

"*Si, si*: ther-re ar-re—oh, *thees* number," answered Felipe, thrusting out both hands, with two fingers curled back. "*Ocho*."

"Eight," muttered Nueces, nodding his head.

"Ever been in Hell's Center?" asked the deputy, feeling for tobacco sack.

"Twice, Señor Nueces, eet ees well name'." The black eyes glanced around the circle, and their owner smiled. He was here to give information, but not eagerly, not to volunteer it. He would answer questions.

"Th' town very far from here?" asked Duncan, idly breaking a greasewood twig in a very casual manner.

"A day's ride, eef you know the way."

"Hum!" said Duncan, tossing the bits of greasewood on the fire, where they flared up swiftly.

"You know th' way?" asked Hopalong, curiously, looking the Mexican squarely in the eyes.

Felipe shrugged his shoulders and paused in the making of the second cigarette.

"Seex, eight, ten ways, señor; there ees even one from here, close by."

"Uh-huh," grunted Nueces. "Supposin' you was figgerin' to visit th' town: where'd you start, from here?"

"Eef you weel ride weeth me a short ways to-morrow, I weel e-show you," replied Felipe. "I weel e-show you the other tr-rails eef you weesh."

"*Quien es?* Who comes?" sharply rang out the voice of the southern sentry.

There was no answering voice, and the circle around the fire, making a series of beautiful lighted targets, arose as one man and melted into the darkness.

A gun crashed, and again. Lead screamed from the rocky ridge above the fire. Again a gun crashed, this time from the west. Twigs snipped and sifted down. Rustlings sounded here and there, interspersed by low words of caution. There came the sudden creak of leather, the pounding of hoofs, and two more shots.

A horse burst out of the darkness, running and plunging and kicking; and something weighty dragged from a stirrup, jerked heavily by the frantic animal. A shadow arose out of the darkness along the ground like a jack-in-the-box, and leaped for the head of the panicky horse. In another moment two more shadows joined the first and subdued the frightened animal.

". . . tore past me in th' dark an' like to run me down," one of the shadows was saying. The voice sounded as if it belonged to Tex. "Fired point blank at me. If th' hoss hadn't shied at me, I'd be grub for coyotes, right now. Once was enough, so I let him have it. I knowed he wasn't none of us: he was mounted."

"Mebby Nueces or that Mex. will know who he is—or was," said the second shadow. "Looks like th' pot's opened—for th' limit."

"In a table-stake game," said Tex.

"Shore does," said the third shadow. "Untangle him, an' we'll carry him in to th' fire," and the speaker aided in pulling the foot of the dead man back

through the stirrup, where it had slipped and locked. He straightened up suddenly.

"Looks like that gang ain't waitin' for us to call. Wonder how they learned anythin' about us?" he asked.

"Saw th' fire, scouted up close enough to see that we was strangers an' to hear us talkin', an' then tried to get away with th' news."

"Mebby: sounds reasonable. If he was alone, there's no harm done," said the third shadow. He raised his voice carelessly, and other shadows appeared.

At the fire the carriers laid down their burden and Nueces and the Mexican bent over it. They straightened up at the same time, looking across at each other, and gently nodding.

"Black Jim," said Nueces, squinting thoughtfully.

"*Si*" said Felipe, nodding again.

"An' who's he?" asked Hopalong, curiously.

"One of Big Henry's gang," answered Nueces. "Fast work, fast work."

"Then that makes one less," grunted Skinner complacently.

"Which don't cut 'em down very much," said Nueces. "Still, every little bit helps." He turned to the Mexican. "I've heard all kinds of rumors, Felipe: how many are in that gang?"

"Mebby twenty, mebby thir-rty. They come and they go. When all are together, mebby thir-rty. Beeg Henry, Black Jeem, Geor-rge White, E-steve Smeeth, Tom Walters, Paso Frank—they ar-re the beeg ones; but ther-re ar-re many others. Beeg Henry: *si*, but not so beeg as El Toro!"

As Felipe called off the names, his companions nodded at each one: they were the names which had been told to them back in Bulltown, the names they treasured.

"Well," Hopalong said, looking around the circle of friends. "Twenty or thirty kinda changes things. I had hoped to ride in, ask some questions, spot our men, an' start shootin'. No use to waste a lot of time when it ain't necessary; but now I reckon it's necessary. We got to use our wits as much as our guns: mebby more."

"Split up," suggested Skinner, picking Nelson's tobacco sack from its pocket.

"Yeah; split up," echoed Hopalong. "It's th' best thing we can do. We'll learn some of th' other trails in, an' use 'em. If anythin' goes wrong, or we get divided, an' want to come together, this will be th' place to meet.

Chances are we'll be leavin' that town in a hurry, an' mebby will have trouble gettin' supplies for th' outward trip. We'll take care of that before we leave here, an' cache plenty of supplies right near here: canned goods, ca'tridges, things that will keep. That will let us go in light, leave light, an' not have to worry about grub after we get out."

"I can cache 'em so an Injun can't find 'em," said Duncan.

"Good," replied Hopalong. He rubbed his chin. "Split up: yeah. Tex an' I can play our parts easy: we'll be just plain gamblers. You fellers will have to figger out yore own plays, an' pair up to suit yoreselves."

Saunders looked across at Duncan, grinned, and nodded at the sudden knowing expression on his friend's face.

"Reckon me an' Duncan can figger out somethin' that'll suit us," Saunders remarked, thus indicating his choice of companion.

"Reckon that hitches us up double, Nelson," said Matt Skinner, chuckling and looking expectantly at Johnny. He laughed with poorly concealed pleasure. "Us young an' good-lookin' fellers oughta stick together, anyhow. I reckon we oughta get along real well if nobody picks a fight with us."

"I think Hoppy's right about me an' him goin' in together," Tex said. "We're both able to earn a fair livin' at poker, an' we won't have to play any parts in that respect. It's th' natural thing for both of us."

He arose, deftly adjusting his belts, and turned to leave the fire.

"I'll stand my watch, boys. Up there on th' top of that ledge. That means that I can see th' whole layout, an' that means that there won't be no need for th' second sentry."

"I'll go with you," said Hopalong, getting to his feet, "We can talk things out while these boys do th' same thing right here."

Nueces cleared his throat.

"I'll stand th' watch after you, Ewalt," he volunteered. "I can sleep all day to-morrow, if I want to, while you boys will have to keep ridin'. I'll go on duty when you come back, Tex; an' then stay on all th' rest of th' night." He chuckled at the expostulations which met his announced self-sacrifice, and waved the arguments aside.

"I can't go with you, but I shore pine to do what I can. It's all settled when th' deppety speaks. As a matter of fact, I'd just as soon start right now, an' run th' whole trick. *That's* th' idear, Ewalt! You an' Cassidy stay here

with th' gang an' talk everythin' over with 'em, while you got plenty of time. I'll go up on th' ledge right now."

"I weel go weeth you, an' e-sleep while you watch," offered the Mexican, thus effacing himself with graceful tact. "Then you weel e-sleep while I watch, no?"

"Shore! That's th' idear, Felipe. Me an' you will guard these tenderfeet an' listen to their snores. Set right down ag'in, Tex; you, too, Cassidy. You boys ain't got much time to arrange things before you split up." He laughed and shook his head, and stubbornly held to his purpose; and at last they let him have his own way and watched him and the Mexican fade into the night.

"Wish that string bean was goin' with you an' me, Nelson," said Matt, his imagination soaring. "Man, *oh*, man!"

VI

BREAKFAST WAS eaten, supplies were cached, and everything was cleared away by sunrise. Nueces led Hopalong and Tex northward along the edge of the lava desert, following detailed instructions which he had obtained from Felipe during their watch of the night before. It had been agreed that Hopalong and Tex were to go in first along the northern trail. Nueces would put them on it and leave them, himself returning to Willow Springs.

The Mexican and the others rode southward along the trail toward San Ignacio on their way to other routes leading in to Hell's Center. It was about noon when the guide drew up and waved a hand toward the west, nodding significantly.

"Wheech of the señores go een fir-rst?" he asked, expectantly.

"Don't make any difference as far as I can see," said Saunders, glancing inquiringly at his partner in the venture. Duncan nodded his agreement, and his companion continued. "We're ready to start, Nelson, if you an' Skinner are satisfied."

"Makes no difference," replied Johnny, his eyes on Skinner's placid face. Matt nodded.

"We won't say so-long yet," remarked Saunders. "As soon as Felipe shows us th' trail we'll come back ag'in. We've got to wait a couple of days before we start in, so as not to get to Hell's Center at th' same time Hopalong an' Tex arrive. We'll hole up somewhere not far away from here. We can allus get water back where we camped last night. Go ahead, Felipe."

The Mexican swung his horse toward the lava sea, and in a few moments the three men were lost to the sight of their waiting friends. The high and broken lava ridges swallowed them quickly.

In a little more than a quarter of an hour Felipe and his two companions emerged and soon joined the waiting pair.

"We got her figgered," said Saunders, pulling up. "Found th' main trail. We'll wait here two days an' then start in."

They shook hands all around, and Felipe again led the way southward at a distance-eating lope.

"We've got to wait a day or two on our own account," said Nelson, breaking a half-hour's silence. He glanced at the guide. "Hope you can locate us not too far away from water."

"We go to San Ignacio, señores. That ees wher-re you weel e-stay onteel time for to r-ride een. San Ignacio ees wher-re Hell's Center gets supplies. The tr-rail fr-rom ther-re een ees not so har-rd to follow, and eet ees not so long. Eet ees well travel'."

"Suits me," grunted Matt. "I'd rather wait in town than out here."

"Ain't so shore," growled Johnny. "From what I've heard, San Ignacio is a bad town."

Mile followed mile. The shadows stretched farther and farther into the east. The huge, coppery sun sat for a moment on the knife-like edge of a distant range of low, scorched mountains, and swiftly dropped from sight; and then began that magic interval when the unexpected beauties of the desert transformed it. The twilight softened the harshness of the surroundings and one thrusting, rugged peak became the color of molten iron slowly cooling. Night came slowly on. From a ridge they at last looked southward across a low, wide valley, where man-made glints of light shone under the magnificent blazing of the stars. Down the slope, across a stretch of level sand, and then they splashed through the shallow, turgid boundary river, to emerge on its farther bank. They were in Mexico, and the kerosene lamps of San Ignacio beckoned them on.

"*Quien es?*" rang out sharply from a scrubby patch of chaparral.

Felipe answered the challenge, speaking swiftly in Spanish, and led the way again after the momentary pause. They came to and passed the first scattered adobe houses, stray dogs snarling at them and slouching out of their path. Smells were very noticeable. Low conversations in Spanish hushed as they passed, to swell up behind them; fragments of song, a low laugh, and a bit of cursing came through the dark.

The three riders dismounted near the door of a cantina and entered. The big room was filled with the hum of a melodious language, through which sounded the thin but lively notes of stringed instruments. Everything was bathed in a blaze of light.

As they entered the door the two Americans looked sidewise and over their shoulders. An armed man sat on each side of the door, against the wall. Whether they were there as guards, or just chanced to have dropped in that position, the strangers did not know; but they exchanged significant glances and continued after their guide, careless of the frowns which met them on all sides. They went, as straight as the layout of the tables would permit, toward a slightly raised platform in the far corner of the room. On this two men were seated. One of them was the Mexican whom they had met in the JC

bunkhouse. If this proved to be El Toro, then they had been right in their guess up in the bunkhouse.

El Toro regarded their approach with a welcoming smile and he raised a hand in salutation, whereupon the scowls throughout the room became effaced, their places taken by apologetic smiles.

"Welcome to San Ignacio, señores," said the bandit, waving the upraised hand in a gesture which seemed to include everything. "The town, eet ees yours. Thees ees Federico. Federico, meet the American señores Juan and Mateo. You weel notice—no?—that Federico ees enough of a name for a man; that Juan and Mateo ar-re enough for names. Ther-re ar-re many Federicos and Juans and Mateos in the wor-rld. One name ees enough for one man een *thees* country. Ees eet not so?"

"*Si, Excelencia*," answered Federico, grinning.

"One's enough for me," chuckled Matt, "an' that one ain't my own."

"Deed you have tr-rouble? Were you pursue'?" asked the bandit, one eyelid twitching downward.

Johnny thought so quickly that he answered without hesitation.

"Only at first," he replied. "We lost 'em a hundred miles back."

"I figger it nearer eighty," corrected Matt. "But what's twenty miles when that river is behind us?"

"Hah! Either ees enough," laughed El Toro. "*One* would be enough, now that you ar-re her-re. Gringo sheriffs do not cross the river eento San Ignacio. Her-re ar-re two chairs for you, *amigos*. Rest yourselves."

"I'm figgerin' that it's time for a drink, after all that ridin'," said Matt, his gaze settling on two tough-looking Americans who sat at a table halfway along the side wall. He raised his hand, beckoning to the bartender; but the bartender saw only the swiftly raised hand of El Toro, and he obeyed the bandit, hastening to the platform, where he stood at attention.

"You ar-re my guests to-night, *amigos*," said El Toro. "Say w'at you weel dreenk." He followed Matt's gaze, and nodded swiftly. "You have seen two of your countrymen, *si*? We weel have them her-re."

He raised his voice and hand, speaking swiftly in Spanish. The two hard-looking Americans arose and moved toward the platform.

"Fellow-countrymen should dreenk together. Say w'at you weel have, señores." He chuckled. "Wheesky, wheesky all the time; nothing but wheesky! Well, ther-re ar-re wor-rse dreenks, and also better. Wheesky for

me, too; een honor of our guests. And also for you, Federico? *Si*, that ees right."

The order given and the bartender on his way to fill it, El Toro smiled at the four Americans.

"Señores Juan and Mateo ar-re str-rangers een thees town," he said. "Eet ees well that Americans een a for-reign countr-ry should know each other. Shake han's weeth Tomas and Beel."

He chuckled as the four men shook hands.

"Señores Tomas and Beel, they look for gold een the lava countr-ry," he continued. "Señores Juan and Mateo blessed the waters of the Rio Grande after they had passed eets middle. We weel dreenk together, and then you Americans may go off by yourselves eef you weesh."

In a few minutes the four Americans were seated at the table halfway along the side wall. Johnny ordered another round of drinks. He and Matt could drink glass for glass with the other two and have the best of it, since Tom and Bill had been punishing the liquor quite steadily for the last hour or more. And so they passed the time away and began to get acquainted, and when they parted Bill was weeping on Matt's shoulder and swearing eternal friendship.

They met again the next day and spent most of it in each other's company; and again the day after that, and the following day. And then it came out, a little at a time, that Johnny and Matt, having reached Mexico and safety, could not remain south of the line indefinitely: they had to get back to the United States, but dared not follow any of the established trails. Having planted this thought as a seed, they waited for it to sprout, which it did swiftly.

Bill and Tom, having idled away as much time as they dared, were forced to leave not long after the seed was planted, and they invited their new friends to go with them along a trail which was safe at every point; and from the end of which they could fare forth with a large degree of safety. So thus, having prepared the way for an unsuspicious entry into the lava country and Hell's Center, the two friends waited upon the pleasure of their guides; and, one morning, saddled up and again crossed the river, heading toward their goal, and heading toward it as fugitives from justice.

VII

MEANWHILE HOPALONG and Tex were moving along a faint trail which dipped and wound over and around the lava ridges and boulders. Seasoned as they were to desert heat, they found the blazing sun so powerfully thrown back at them from the sprawled lava that they had all they could do to endure it. They had other things to worry about, however: their horses were unshod, and they knew that a day or two of this kind of footing would wear the horn of the hoofs to the quick; and that would mean that they would be afoot in a place where such a condition would be serious, indeed.

Hopalong turned in the saddle and spoke over his shoulder.

"I think a lot of this saddle, Tex; but right now I think a heap more of this cayuse's hoofs." He leaned over and glanced down. "Barefoot hosses ain't got no business in here."

"It might not come to that, Hoppy," said Tex, referring to his friend's remark about the saddle. "There'll be time enough later to make moccasins out of saddle skirts. Anyhow, as I remember it, that Mex. said th' lava was bad only on th' outside of this fool hole. We oughta be gettin' over th' rim, an' in another hour or two have sand to travel over. After that, it'll be sand all th' way."

They soon left the greater part of the lava field behind them and followed the trail that wound over the sand between the upthrust blocks and ridges of the threatening igneous rock. In time lava appeared only occasionally, where the winds had swept the sand from it; and then, shortly after noon, in the bottom of a very shallow but wide depression, appeared a faint, gray-green patch. From the near edge of this patch a ragged ridge of lava and obsidian thrust up a hundred feet or more above the plain, and shut off the view of the northern part of the depression.

"Creek," muttered Hopalong, peering ahead. He saw no water, but the color of the gray-green patch promised it.

"Yeah," replied Tex. "Water an' a little range of grass. Th' town had ought to be somewhere over yonder. Behind that ridge, probably."

"We're gettin' close," said Hopalong after a moment's silence. "You figger you can break th' habit of years, an' quit callin' me Hopalong?"

"You figger you can break th' habit of near a lifetime, an' answer prompt to any other name, without bein' prodded into it?" countered Tex, grinning.

"Yes," answered Hopalong.

"Yes," said Tex.

Hopalong chuckled and pretended to be thinking deeply. He scratched his head in perplexity and then laughed.

"Oh, yes," he said; "my name is William."

"I've heard th' women folks call you that," retorted Tex; "but you can't put on no airs with me. Bill suits you a lot better."

"Bill it used to be, an' Bill it is."

"An' what's yore last name?" asked Tex.

"I've plumb forgot it."

"An' so have I," said Tex. He ran a hand up under the sweatband of his hat. "What about me?" he asked.

"There's as many Texes in this part of th' country as there are fleas on an Injun's dog."

"An' it's a dang lucky dog that has them kind of fleas," retorted Tex. He readjusted that hat more to his liking. "Tex will be all right until I start playin' poker. After that, I dunno. You see, I may have to exert myself in th' crowd we'll be millin' around with; an' if I do, I ain't so shore that Tex is a good name. An' lemme tell you somethin', Bill: if they figger me they'll figger you, too, because yo're with me. How about Panhandle: that's Texas, an' it's easy. *Pan* is my *handle*."

"All right, all right, all right!" retorted Hopalong. "Name yoreself: if I had my way you'd be a number. Panhandle she is."

"Keno, Bill. Well, well, well: looks like we're gettin' somewhere," said Tex, pointing ahead.

The course they had been pursuing for the last mile or more had shifted them laterally, in relation to the great pile of igneous rock; and now they saw the corner of an adobe shack slowly emerging from behind the ridge and moving steadily into their widening field of vision.

"Yeah," grunted Hopalong, with satisfaction. "I reckon we've arrived."

Five minutes later they were certain of it. The squat buildings of the sprawled-out town were now revealed. The gray-green patch which they had noticed some miles back now became a large range of poor grazing land. A faint-hearted creek slunk along over its gravelly bed on the far side of the town. Blacksmith shop, general store, a harness-maker's shop, two saloons with two-story false fronts, and a so-called hotel made up the town. In the distance, on the farther edge of the gray-green range and at the head of a

narrow rill, was a small, adobe house. When this caught the eyes of the newcomers it made their jaws tighten.

"I reckon that's it, Bill," said Tex, scowling.

"Reckon so, Panhandle." Hopalong's eyes were studying the cluster of buildings thoughtfully. He turned his head and swept the surrounding country with a quick appraising glance.

"The devil's own country—and this is one of the few stops along the route. Sort of a handy stop-over for folks travelin' from down below to up north and vice versa—folks that mightn't want to be seen too plain by honest men. And one honest family in that little 'dobe house there could see enough to bust things wide open, if a sheriff ever come poking around this way."

Tex shook his head. "That'd be reason enough for killin' or drivin' 'em out. But not for torturing."

"Reckon you're right," Hopalong nodded. "There was something they were trying to find out—that's the only answer." Again his eyes swept the forbidding country. "That kid sure had some nerve to come in here and settle down, even if his uncle did make him a present of that 'dobe and a few cows."

"What else could he do but take a look at it? Figgered mebby it would be a good place to make a start. I've seen places just as bad, with greenhorn squatters hangin' on with their finger nails. He never counted on stayin' out here all his life. Suffer for a few years in hope of somethin' big." He shook his head. "He never knew what th' desert does to some folks: how it holds 'em. An' anyhow, from little things I've heard you say, he had gold on his mind: an', Bill, gold is where you find it."

"Yeah, shore is. Reckon th' blacksmith shop is our first stop," said Bill.

"Shore: hosses first, humans second, in th' cow-country. Best have 'em put in good shape: no tellin' how soon we'll need sound hoofs."

When they had left their horses in the blacksmith shop, they sauntered down the street and soon found themselves in a rough saloon and gambling hall. The bar ran across a side wall, and behind the counter was a man with a twisted jaw and puffed up ears, who squinted at them as they moved forward with the blazing outside light behind them.

"Howdy," said the bartender.

"Pour out three drinks an' make mine rye," said Bill.

"Corn for me," said Panhandle. "I want somethin' that'll take off th' skin. First, however, I'll have a big drink of water."

"Me, too," said Bill. "That's a dry ride."

The bartender filled the glasses, slid out two smaller glasses and two bottles, and selected a cigar for himself out of a wide-mouthed bottle in which was a piece of damp sponge.

"Don't nobody live in this town but you an' th' blacksmith?" asked Bill, wiping his lips with the back of a hand.

"They mostly sleep till afternoon," replied the bartender. "Yo're strangers here," he said, making a statement and not asking a question.

"Yeah," said Panhandle, sighing gratefully. He picked up the bourbon bottle, poured out a generous drink and tossed it down, and blinked. "B-r-r-r-r! That's rough! Well, I like it that way, sometimes." He watched his friend toss down the rye, and raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

Bill nodded, answering the wordless question.

"Good frontier liquor," he said, tossing a coin on the bar.

"Have another," said Panhandle.

After the second round the two newcomers leaned lazily against the bar, idly talking. The invitation from the man behind the counter was accepted in silence, and now it was all square.

"How come you managed to find this town?" asked the bartender carelessly; but his carelessness was simulated, and the simulation was a little overdone.

"Oh, we just follered th' trail in from Tinaja Verde," answered Bill, changing feet on the rail.

The bartender looked at him closely, his expression a combination of surprise, suspicion, and incredulity. He was wondering if the trail had become as plain as all that. It was a matter worth investigating.

"That so?" he inquired. "Usually it's blowed over purty much with sand, an' right hard to find."

"We didn't find it drifted," said Panhandle, helping him out. "We couldn't 'a' found it a-tall, only we were told where to look."

"Oh," said the bartender. He put the bottles back on the shelf behind him, rinsed out the glasses, and fell to polishing them with a soiled cloth. "There don't seem to be many folks that know about it," he added, fishing.

"So we heard," said Bill, with great satisfaction. His face fairly beamed. "That suits us; an' we figger to forget all about it when we get out ag'in."

"Some of th' boys yore friends?"

"Not exactly; but we know one of 'em, a little," said Panhandle. "Know him to speak to," he amended.

"Yeah? Who's that?" asked the bartender without particular interest, one man's name in his suspicious mind.

Panhandle knew that he was being cross-questioned and therefore began to enjoy himself.

"Feller called Black Jim—don't know his real name," he answered.

The bartender cogitated for a moment and a sly look crept into his eyes. He slid the bar cloth over the counter and looked up carelessly.

"Was he comin' in or goin' out?" he asked.

"Just seemed to be hangin' around, waitin' for somethin'."

The bartender smothered a curse and changed the subject.

"Some of th' boys will be driftin' in purty soon," he said, and wiped off the counter again. His attitude implied that the conversation, so far as he was concerned, had come to an end.

The two strangers pushed away from the bar, espied a deck of cards on a table, and moved toward them. They were idly playing California Jack when the first townsman appeared. This person strode to the bar, put his back against it, and looked steadily at the two card players. At a word from the bartender he moved his head sideways, but did not take his eyes from the strangers. After a moment or two he sauntered toward the table.

"Howdy," he said, nodding carelessly. "Strangers to town?"

"Yeah," answered Bill, favoring the questioner with a glance. "Yore deal," he said to his companion, and sat back, his eyes on the deck.

The dealer's hands grew quiet for a moment as he looked up.

"Set in?" he invited.

The townsman shook his head.

"No," he answered, and returned to the skirmish. "We don't see many strangers in here."

"So I heard," replied Panhandle. He slid out the deck for the cut, but his own hands were close to his side of the table when his companion reached out for the cards. Their questioner seemed to be somewhat hostile.

"You did, huh? An' who told you that?"

"Black Jim."

"You boys friends of his?"

"Nope; but we once met th' gent."

"Where was he when you met him this last time?" persisted the townsman.

"Hangin' 'round that water hole over east—Tinaja Verde, he called it," answered Panhandle carelessly.

"Was he there when you left?"

"Shore," said Bill, breaking into the conversation. This was the exact truth, but he did not feel that it was necessary to explain that Black Jim was two feet under the sand and covered over, not too conspicuously, with a layer of rocks to baffle coyotes.

"What brought you in here? How did you come to hit Tinaja Verde?"

Panhandle dealt the last card, placed the deck on the table near his hand, and turned slightly in his chair, which let his right leg drop down so that the holster would be lying straight up-and-down.

"An' what was yore grandmother's middle name?" he asked, gently.

"What you say?"

"I said I allus did like curious hombres," answered Panhandle, slowly and evenly; "but it seems to me that yo're too damn' curious. Is there anythin' else you'd like to know about our own personal affairs?"

"If there is, I'll ask you, an' don't you forget it!" retorted the townsman in some heat. "Why are you in Hell's Center, an' how well did you know Black Jim?"

"Speak up, strangers," said the friendly voice of the bartender.

"Why, I once loaned Black Jim a hoss to get away on," said Panhandle. "I never saw him before, an' I never saw him ag'in, till early this mornin' at that water hole. I didn't know him then, first off; but he knowed me. He asked me where I was goin'. I told him San Ignacio. He warned me to stay away from there. After a little talk he showed me how to get in here; an' here I am. I play poker for a livin'. He said lots of poker was played in here: so here I am, me an' my friend. If you've got any more questions to ask, answer 'em yoreself."

"Oh! Pair of tin-horns, huh?" sneered the townsman.

Panhandle slowly reached into a pocket and brought out a sizable roll of big bills.

"There's six thousan' dollars in that roll, an' you can count it if you want. That look like a tin-horn's layout?" He picked up the deck and placed it on the edge of the table nearest to the townsman. "Six thousan', even money, that I can cut a higher card than you can, aces bein' one-spots. Put up or shut up."

"An' if you win that," said Bill, pleasantly, also producing a big roll, "I'll double or quit you for it. Ain't sick, are you?"

The townsman looked from one cold face to the other, opened his mouth to speak, changed his mind, and turned on his heel. He strode to the bar, ordered a drink, and turned his back on the strangers.

The awed bartender handed out the wrong bottle and had to correct himself; and after the townsman stalked from the building, he wiped off a dry counter and then, making up his mind abruptly, walked around it and to the card table, where he dropped into a nearby chair.

"That was Big Henry," he said, warningly. "He's boss of this town. You don't want to roll no spurs on him."

"You must 'a' been a pushover for a right cross," observed Panhandle, grinning. "Is he a friend of Black Jim's?"

"Shucks, no!" exclaimed the ex-pugilist. "Big Henry run him out of here. Was fixin' to shoot him; but Jim got wind of it, an' slipped out yesterday. What was Jim doin' at Tinaja Verde?"

"You startin' in to ask questions, too?" demanded Bill.

"No! No! I was just wonderin', that's all."

"Well, as long as you wondered out loud," said Panhandle, smiling, "Black Jim looked like he was out gunnin' for somebody. He was holed up on th' top of that little ridge just behind th' water hole, with his rifle stickin' out over th' edge."

"Yeah?" said the bartender in a whisper. "Yeah! By golly, I *thought* so!"

A noisy group entered the room and stamped to the bar, and its custodian hastily got up and went to serve them.

Panhandle looked knowingly across the table at his friend, and they both smiled. They had been provided with a chart and they would be fools, indeed, if they could not steer a more or less straight course from now on.

The men at the bar were listening to the low words of the man behind it, and they glanced from time to time at the two card players. One of the

group, hurriedly tossing down his liquor, turned on his heel and hastened from the building; the others gave more attention to the strangers. It was not long before the departing man returned, and with him came Big Henry. The latter walked slowly over to the card table and seated himself in the chair which had been vacated by the bartender.

"You say that you saw Black Jim, back at Tinaja Verde?" he asked, conversationally.

Bill looked at him and found no hostility in the ugly face. The man spoke pleasantly enough and earned, therefore, a friendly answer, despite what Bill knew about him.

"Yes," said Bill, tossing his cards on the table with a weary gesture and pushing them aside with another. It appeared that this was going to be another period of questioning and, if so, he would help to make it a short one.

"We had been follerin' tracks," he said, "which we figgered would take us to San Ignacio; an' to water, too, on th' way. When we got to that water hole th' tracks were all milled about an' mixed up. Looked like quite a gang had spent th' night there. We could see th' signs before we got there, an' we were just about in th' little hollow itself when a feller calls out for us to raise our hands. We looked up, an' shore paid attention to what he said. His rifle was plumb on us, at short range. Then he swore, an' laughed; an' told us to put 'em down ag'in. He knowed my friend's name; an' Panhandle, here, soon knowed who th' jasper was. They had met before."

Big Henry looked from Bill to Panhandle, his brow puckered in thought.

"Black Jim have anythin' to say about us here in Hell's Center?"

Panhandle chuckled, and nodded briskly.

"He shore did! I don't reckon he left out anythin' about you, so far as cussin' is concerned. Bartender says yo're called Big Henry. That's th' feller Black Jim was layin' for. He was shore disappointed when he saw who we was.

"We had been movin' around th' country, playin' poker," Panhandle continued; "an' we reckoned we'd go on down an' cross th' line. Black Jim talked us out of that, an' says there's quite some easy money right in here; an' a lot of fellers that only think they know how to play th' game. Them's *his* idears, an' not ours." He laughed again with genuine enjoyment, and included the line-up at the bar in his quizzical scrutiny.

"You boys," he called, addressing them, "may be easy, but you shore don't look it," Then he faced Big Henry again, serious and earnest.

"Now, we don't care nothin' a-tall about Black Jim's troubles, or yourn," he said with a smile. "He's no friend of ourn. I helped him out of a bad corner once by lendin' him a good hoss; an' I never got th' hoss back, nor one cent in place of it. I hated to see a man lynched. I'd do th' same for anybody, if I had th' chance, in th' same circumstances."

Big Henry nodded, but said nothing, and Panhandle continued.

"Jim killed a bully in a fair fight; but th' bully's friends owned th' town, an' ran things to suit themselves. That was th' last I saw of Jim, until we met him at th' water hole. We came away an' left him there. That's all there is to it. If any of you fellers would like to play a little poker after while, say so; if you don't, we'll stay around for a few days, an' then pull our stakes. That's a long speech, all together: let's have a drink, all around."

"Black Jim was all right till he got so that he wanted to run things," said Big Henry. "This place got so small it wouldn't hold us both. Jim pulled out an' figgered, mebby, that I'd go after him. When he left, that settled th' trouble. I don't care where he is, or where he's goin'; but if he ever comes back here he'll have to shoot it out with me. I reckon you'll find plenty of poker in this town, an' you might find more than you can handle. I'll take corn, for mine."

The bartender got busy, and the first round was followed by a second, and a third. After the third, Bill and Panhandle took cigars, as did Big Henry. Time slipped past, and then Bill arose.

"We left our hosses with th' blacksmith," he said. "Reckon it's time we got 'em. Where'll we put 'em, an' where will we sleep an' eat?"

"Put 'em in th' corral, out back," said Big Henry. "You can sleep down th' street, an' eat at th' Virginia House, two doors south; or you can sleep in th' Virginia House if you want to pay more than it's worth. An' you can eat at a lunch room, if you wants. This ain't a big town, but it's got most of th' fixin's. Th' bartender will look after yore animals."

"You needn't come unless you want to, Panhandle," said Bill as his friend started to arise.

"All right," said Panhandle, sitting down again. He looked at Big Henry, sighed with content, and slowly puffed on the cigar. "Who's this here El Toro coyote I've been hearin' so much about?"

Big Henry relighted his cigar, stretched out his legs, and began to talk on a subject in which he was interested; and so the time passed, uneventfully.

VIII

AFTER A mediocre supper Bill and Panhandle drifted along to the Palmer House. Evidently some member of this community either had been to Chicago or had heard about its famous hotel. It seemed to please the humor of the West to indulge in these innocent fancies.

The saloon was comfortably filled, and the ex-pugilist bartender now had an assistant, whose one good eye was shifty and liked to settle on collars and upper shirt buttons. Either the liquor was very powerful or had been very freely used, for several men were well into the quarrelsome stage.

Bill and his friend paused inside the door, looking the place over. Neither was dressed as a gambler, nor wore the full regalia of a cowpuncher; but there was no mistaking the openness with which both wore their guns. An uncertain but hearty invitation to drink, bellowed like a blast in the room, and the two friends smilingly accepted. They raised their glasses in a polite gesture, and three heads went back as one, Big Henry slobbering a little. The treat was made three-square, and the drinkers shifted, and leaned with their sides against the edge of the bar.

"Hell's Center shore is comin' to life, ain't she?" asked Big Henry, with unconcealed pride. He smiled at the answering nods, and hooked a huge thumb in his sagging belt. "This here's *my* town," he announced, and glared around in search of some doubter. "I made 'er. Everythin' was packed in on th' hoof. I *made* her, an', blast it, I *run* her!" The boast was only partly true, for the town had been made and deserted long before he saw it.

"Looks like you got a tight rein on her," commented Panhandle, admiringly.

"You shore got her well broke an' gentled," said Bill, nodding.

"Yo're shootin' straight, friends," said Big Henry, scowling again as his questing gaze swept over the room. The gaze stopped and rested on an unfortunate inebriate, who had the bad fortune to be laughing immoderately as this particular moment. Big Henry stiffened, stood erect, and weaved as straight as he could go toward the mirthful one.

"What's so durn funny?" he demanded, swaying a little as he stopped in front of the other. "What you laughin' at, you —— ——?"

"I dunno; dunno a-tall," replied the other, blinking to adjust the focus of his independent eyes. He raised a slow arm and pushed Big Henry back a

few inches. "Yo're standin' right'n my way," he complained in drunken gravity, the mirth swiftly dying. "How can I go any place with you standin' right'n my way?" he demanded, and a burst of unreasoning anger swept through him. He pushed again, and as Big Henry pivoted, the hand slid off and its owner staggered forward and almost fell. To save himself he grabbed at Big Henry: and the fight was on.

It was not a pleasant fight, even for the very brief time that it lasted: gouging, biting, and strangling serving as a reminder of the old keelboat days. Sober friends interfered and tore the combatants apart, dragging them toward opposite ends of the room.

The faces of both were suffused with rage, and both were shouting curses at the top of their lungs. Big Henry was not so drunk that he did not realize that his leadership over such men could ill afford a draw: to remain boss of Hell's Center and the gang, he had to emerge victorious; and as the restraining hands let loose of him, he moved as swiftly as a striking snake. His big right hand fell and rose, eluding a frantic grasp at it; and the roar of the big-calibered gun filled the room.

French George jerked forward spasmodically, strangled horribly, and pitched sidewise to the floor, a ghastly lesson for others to profit by.

The big gun swung from side to side, waist high, and above it glared hot eyes from a rage-contorted face.

"Anybody else want to go somewhere?" he shouted, and then the humor of the phrase struck him and set him to laughing. "Go somewhere! He durn well did! An' he *ain't* comin' back!"

Placating voices arose, condemning the course of the dead man, flattering the victor, the speakers caring only to get that gun back into its sheath and its owner into a better mood. One voice rang out above all others, its timbre as penetrating as that of a cornet, and its invitation was one which usually was accepted. There was a rush toward the bar, Big Henry carried along in it, and when the last empty glass slammed down on the counter, the boss of Hell's Center was restored to good humor. What remained of French George had been whisked away, and now the room was much the same as it was before the tragedy.

Big Henry pushed back from the counter and moved unsteadily along the line-up, stopping when he found the two strangers. He steadied himself by resting a hand on Bill's shoulder, and peered curiously into the pale blue eyes.

"You got to keep a tight rein in a place like this," he said. "You keep a tight rein. You got to break 'em, an' keep 'em broke. Ain't that right? Ain't that right, friend?"

"Reckon it is," said Bill, controlling himself by an effort.

"What *you* think?" demanded Big Henry, looking closely at Panhandle.

"I think yo're just th' man to do it."

"Right! Yo're right! I'm goin' to like you boys! Have a drink with me, friends!" said the boss of Hell's Center. He slapped the shoulders of the two men in sudden friendship and bellowed to the hurrying bartender.

Two men now moved out of the silent crowd and pushed in between Big Henry and his new friends, nodding almost imperceptibly to the latter. They linked their arms through those of the boss, their hands close to his guns, and both began to talk to him in low and soothing voices. At first he resisted, but gradually began to yield to them, and in a few moments he was weaving toward the door under the guidance of his two guards and henchmen. As he was lost to sight in the night outside, a sigh ran around the room and men began to move about and to talk again.

The ex-pugilist leaned forward over the counter, thrusting his head as close to the strangers as he could get it.

"That's a reg'lar nightly perceedin'," he said in a whisper, "puttin' Big Henry to bed. They was just a mite late gettin' at it to-night, though. They should 'a' seen that he was drunk earlier than usual. French George didn't mean nothin'!"

"Then you didn't see George reach for his gun?" inquired Bill in mild surprise. The man was dead, and no farther harm could come to him.

"No! *Did* he?" asked the bartender, his mouth opening in surprise.

"That's th' worst of bein' a busy man like you," said Panhandle, and turned away, his friend Bill at his side.

They made for a round table in a rear corner of the room, where a poker game was already under way. Exchanging perfunctory nods with the players, the two strangers drew up chairs and settled down to play the part of audience, to enjoy the play and the conversation, the latter being largely about the killing of French George.

It seemed that French George had been another man who had shown growing signs of discontent and rebellion against the leadership of the man who had killed him; and the tragedy thus moved out of the class of casual drunken brawls. Suddenly the topic was switched and the talk became

purely incidental to the game; and, looking around for a clue to explain the change, Bill and Panhandle saw the two guards entering the room. The two friends let their gazes wander casually on and drift back to the game before them. The play had again claimed their entire attention when a stir announced another arrival.

"Hey, Steve," called one of the players to the newcomer. "Come on over an' take a hand with us."

" 'Lo, Smith," said another, inching his chair sideways to make room.

Panhandle and Bill looked up at the newcomer, each mentally checking another name on the list, and nodded casually.

Steve Smith returned the nods, regarded the strangers with apparent suspicion, and abruptly wheeled and strode to the bar, where he carried on a low-voiced conversation with the ex-pugilist. He had a drink, and then wandered about the room for a few minutes, finally stopping near to the poker players.

"Thompson got back yet?" asked the dealer, looking up and flashing the strangers a glance.

"Ain't time yet," growled Smith, dragging a chair up to the table. He glanced across at the two strangers. "You punchers?" he asked.

Bill smiled and shook his head.

"Not reg'lar," he answered. "Gamblin's more in our line."

"Hum!" grunted Steve, watching the cards as they fell in front of him. He glanced at them, put them down again, and passed when it came his turn. Suddenly he looked back at Bill.

"You see French George reach for his gun?" he asked.

Bill frowned, and nodded slowly.

"Thought I did; but I might 'a' been mistook."

"You wasn't," growled Smith, looking at the other stranger inquiringly. "How 'bout you?"

Panhandle regarded him levelly.

"He made a motion, an' I would 'a' read it th' same as Big Henry did," he replied, making a statement which in reality stated nothing.

Smith was studying them both and passed on the next two deals; and then, apparently having made up his mind, he looked across at two of his companions, nodded his head and then jerked it sideways. The two men

finished the play and then rose, cashed in their chips, and wandered over to a game just starting in the other end of the room.

"Set in, strangers," invited Smith, his voice holding something of a command in it. "Gamblers make their livin' playin', an' you fellers can't make nothin' by settin' out an' lookin' on. If these stakes ain't big enough, all you have to do is to say so."

"They suit me," grunted Bill, changing chairs.

"They'll do for a warmin' up, anyhow," said Panhandle, buying a stack of chips.

If Smith wanted to test them and find out if they were really what they claimed to be, he had no cause to complain when the verification proved to be expensive. The game ran on for a few hours, and then died a natural death. Panhandle had most of the chips, and Bill was not a loser.

"Heck, let's end this!" growled Smith, pushing back from the table. "I'm through. You boys don't have to stop, though."

"I've had plenty," growled another player. "I reckon you fellers don't have to worry about eatin' reg'lar," he said, looking at the two strangers.

"Only when luck's ag'in us," replied Panhandle, smiling in good nature.

"Luck!" sneered the third outlaw.

Bill regarded him with strong disapproval.

"Before preceedin' with more of them kinda remarks, you want to be shore you can back 'em up," he warned, and glanced swiftly at Smith, who was standing at the back of a chair waiting for developments.

"We're strangers here, Smith," continued Bill, watching the other man. "That don't mean that we ain't got th' right to take our own parts. Still, we can't very well buck a whole roomful."

"Nobody cuts in on personal matters that don't concern 'em," said Smith. He glanced around the room, which had grown suddenly quiet, and then looked at the sneering player.

"If you got anythin' to say, *say* it; if yo're only guessin', keep yore mouth shut," he ordered.

"I got my suspicions," retorted the third player, frowning.

"Name 'em," said Bill, looking the man in the eye. "Or shut up!" he added after a moment, breaking a tense silence.

"I will, when I'm ready," came the low reply, and the speaker moved slowly toward the bar.

Smith watched him for a moment, and then turned his eyes on the waiting strangers, and laughed sarcastically.

"Every time Powers loses a few dollars he's ready to accuse th' whole world," he said. "Don't pay no attention to him," he added, and pulled out a battered silver watch. Studying it for a moment, he grunted something under his breath and walked toward the door without a backward glance, leaving the strangers to find two chairs against the wall and to occupy them. Half an hour later a dust-covered rider pulled up before the door and hastened into the room.

"Where's th' boss?" he asked, looking around.

"Where he usually is this time of night," answered a voice.

"Had a headache, an' turned in early," said another laughingly.

"Smith was here half an hour ago," said a third, "waitin' for you. You find anythin'?" A sound made the speaker look toward the door. "Here's Smith now."

"You made good time," said Smith. "Find anythin'?"

"Yeah; saw where he lay on th' top of th' ridge," answered the newcomer. "Wind had blowed th' sand around considerable, but I could make out his ashes. Others have been around there recently, too."

"You scout around?"

"Yeah. Oh, he was up there, all right; but he pulled out before I got there. There's no tellin' where he is now."

Smith glanced at the two strangers, unconsciously nodded confirmation of their tale, and went over to them. He drew up a third chair and leaned back against the wall between them.

"Dang ambushin' snake," he growled, and then led the conversation into casual subjects.

The second card game broke up, and the same suspicious player, having gotten into it, raised another tense moment by making an ill-advised objection. The quarrel flared, died down, and Powers slouched to the door, swearing under his breath. Smith laughed outright as the man disappeared into the night.

"Lookit the time!" roared the ex-pugilist. "Ain't you fellers never goin' to bed? I'm closin' up, an' I'm closin' now! Lights out!"

Smith looked at his watch, and nodded.

"Two a.m.," he grunted, and tipped forward in his chair. "Let's let that puff-eared baboon close up an' get to bed."

"What'd you say?" demanded the bartender suspiciously.

"I said you'd had a long day," laughed Smith, starting for the door.

"Ain't what I heard!" retorted the bartender, and took it out by mumbling savagely to himself.

IX

BILL AND PANHANDLE slept until after noon, and then loafed around, killing time until supper called them. They loafed for a while in the general store and noticed that the shelves were well stocked: indeed they were better stocked than the shelves in many of the stores in the larger towns along the trails. A dozen or more pack mules, grazing over the bottoms along the creek, showed how the supplies came in to Hell's Center. This desert store could outfit large parties on no notice whatever.

After supper the Palmer House filled slowly. Two or three of the men who had been present on the previous night were not to be seen, and several new faces were in the crowd.

Big Henry, with his two henchmen near him, remained sober; evidently he had a job to do; and from the looks on the faces of the men in the room, to-night's job was something for the crowd to worry about.

The men at the tables and in the chairs along the walls exchanged questioning glances and watched the door more or less furtively. Midnight came and went and nothing out of the ordinary had taken place. By this time the tension had died down, evidently on the belief that if trouble was in store for anyone, it was for someone who was not present. A game or two got under way, some of the men had drifted out and disappeared. Steve Smith and two of the players of the night before moved toward the large round table, looking inquiringly at Big Henry, Panhandle, and Bill.

The former shook his head, growling a refusal, his eyes on the open door.

"Not to-night," he said. "Go ahead: I'll look on."

Bill replied to the inquiring looks by dragging a chair up to the table, but Panhandle smiled, shook his head, and leaned back against the wall to keep the boss company.

"Whyn't you play?" asked the boss, curiously.

"Rather think of other things an' talk. I'm too lazy to keep my mind on th' cards."

"Thought gamblin' was yore business?" said Big Henry, quickly.

"It is; but a man don't allus feel like 'tendin' to business. You got a snug little town here. It's out of th' way, an' hard to get to. Bet there ain't many people, outside of them that's here, that know th' town is in here."

"Prospectors started it, an' left it when th' boom died," replied Big Henry, forgetting his boast of the night before. "As a matter of fact you couldn't call it a boom. It was more like a hysteric. Half a dozen locoed desert rats got th' idear there was gold in th' crick. They were all friends, an' they tried to keep th' idear to themselves. At that, th' news didn't leak out very much; but enough people got wind of it to flock in and make quite a town. I stumbled onto it by accident—I was takin' a short cut across country an' travelin' fast, an' by gosh here she was."

Panhandle silently rated Big Henry as a possible first-class liar; but knowing that there are numerous abandoned towns in the West, tucked away in gulches, canyons, and even on the flat of deserts, he nodded agreement to the statement and slowly rolled a cigarette.

"Bill an' me are kinda tired of boardin' out," he said, after a moment's silence. "We like to fuss around an' do our own cookin', an' we like to eat our own cookin'. When we rode in we noticed a little shack over on th' bottoms across th' crick. Looks like it would make a good camp. Who owns it?"

Big Henry looked searchingly at the speaker from under bushy eyebrows. His face was slanting forward as it had been a moment before when he had been studying the floor.

"I own it, an' it ain't for hire," he growled, his gaze flicking about the room and catching many furtive glances directed toward himself. He threw back his head and looked directly and threateningly at his companion. "What th' heck ever put that idear into yore mind?" he demanded ominously.

"Why, I don't know, exactly," answered Panhandle in surprise. "Nat'ral thought, I reckon, seein' that our idears happened to run that way. It's off by itself, th' crick is right handy to it, it's got a little corral, an' me an' Bill like to keep camp. Reckon that's why."

"Well, you can get them idears plumb out of yore head!" retorted the boss angrily. "It ain't for hire or use, an' it ain't healthy to go pokin' 'round it. Let's you an' me set in that there game, an' show them fellers how it oughta be played."

"All right; that suits me right up to th' hilt," said Panhandle, tipping forward and dragging his chair after him. "Move over," he laughed, "an' let a couple of experts sit in."

Evidently the boss had given up expecting the arrival of the unknown man, for he not only gave his attention to the game, but he called for whisky

and began to drink as if making up for his earlier abstemiousness; and it was not long before he showed signs of its effect. He grew surly and ugly, and more and more his eyes sought Panhandle's face. His scowl deepened and he began to sit out hands, watching Panhandle more and more. Trouble was in the wind, but the calm gambler gave no sign that he sensed it.

Panhandle had just won a sizable pot and was pulling it toward him, both of his hands out on the table, when Big Henry, loosing an oath, jerked out his gun and covered the reaching gambler. It was so quick and unexpected that it caught them all flat-footed.

"Let 'em lay, you!" snapped the boss. "Why are you so durn interested in that 'dobe shack over in th' bottoms?"

Panhandle relaxed and let his forearms rest on the table as he looked slowly into the scowling face. He was surprised and he showed it; but he was not quite as surprised as it appeared.

"Just wanted a camp," he answered, and again reached for the chips.

"Let 'em lay! *I*'m talkin' to you! Let 'em lay, an' listen!"

"All right," placidly replied Panhandle, sensing Bill's utter relaxation, and knowing what it meant. "You shouldn't go on th' prod like this, Henry. An' you should ease up in yore liquorin'. It ain't reasonable to act like this, when nobody means you any harm."

"You just mind yore own business!" retorted the boss, his face flushing to a deeper color. "My liquor is *my* business. You peel right down to th' truth! Why are you so interested in that old shack?"

"I've already told you that," replied Panhandle patiently. "If you own it an' don't want to hire it out, all right; then I don't want it. Let's see: I reckon it's yore deal, Henry."

Steve Smith's hand and arm moved gently and with deliberate slowness. His fingers touched the leveled gun, closed over the barrel, and turned it aside, whereupon a man in the front of the room jumped lively to get out of line. Smith looked calmly into the blazing eyes of the boss, and he shook his head in gentle reproof; but in his heart was murder. Big Henry was becoming too eager with a gun.

"Take yore hand off my gun, Smith!" ordered the boss, ominously.

"Put it away, Henry," urged Smith speaking softly. "This man didn't mean nothin' a-tall. Liquor allus makes you suspicious. Put it away, an' deal th' cards. Yo're holdin' up th' game."

"Take yore hand off my gun!" repeated Big Henry with a curse. "I'll give you ten seconds to let loose of it! Cope!" he cried, and one of his henchmen stepped forward, hand on gun butt.

"Smith, you let loose of that gun!" growled Cope, his jaw squaring.

"Better let loose of yore own," said Bill gently. For a moment he had been overlooked, but no one was that careless now. In each of his big hands a long-barreled Colt rested, gripped gently, balanced nicely, with big thumbs hooked over the cocked hammers. One of the evil muzzles centered on Cope's suddenly contracting stomach; the other, on Big Henry's soiled vest.

"I don't know what all this durn nonsense is about," said the man with the drop, in an aggrieved voice; "but I'm havin' a run of good luck, an' nobody's private quarrel is goin' to interfere with it. If you fellers got to fight, go outside an' do it, an' let this game go on. Cope, you let loose of that gun; an' you Henry, put yourn back in its sheath, an' deal them cards!"

"You put them guns back, stranger; or I'll have you blowed apart!" shouted the boss, white with rage. "Wilson!" he yelled.

The other henchman moved like a striking snake, with unhesitant and magnificent courage in the face of almost certain death. He was within Bill's range of vision, but he went for his gun in a blur of speed.

The building was filled with crashing roars of sound, and the onlookers threw themselves on the floor, seeking safety. With the first crash, Panhandle leaped backward toward the bar, both guns out. Smith, realizing that he was squarely in the center of the storm, slid under the table; and there he did a very queer thing: his gun jerked upward toward Big Henry's stomach and exploded.

The smoke cleared. Bill had his back to the wall, both guns balanced and covering the room. Panhandle was now at the end of the bar, with the bartender in his sight. Smith crawled out from under his shelter and slowly stood up, his hands innocent of weapons. He glanced from Wilson's huddled figure to that of Cope, and on to where Big Henry sprawled lifeless in the chair, his head and shoulders against the edge of the table. Then he looked at Bill, and at Panhandle, and nodded.

"All right, strangers; you can put 'em away now," he said. "I'm th' new boss of this camp. That —— ——," glancing at the table, "was drivin' with *too* tight a rein. It was gettin' so no man's life was safe."

He looked around the room, where a dozen or more men had forsaken the floor and were now on their feet.

"Put it to a vote, boys," he ordered. "Am I boss?"

Sensing the change due in allegiance, both Bill and Panhandle now nodded grimly, their guns covering the voters.

"Get 'goin'!" snapped Bill. "Vote on her!"

"Pronto!" barked Panhandle.

The vote was instant and unanimous, and Smith turned a smiling face to the two strangers.

"Put 'em away, friends," he said. "You don't need 'em no more."

The two men slowly obeyed and pushed forward toward the table.

"Will you please tell me what in blazes it was all about?" asked Bill, wonderingly.

"Yeah," said Panhandle, curiously.

"Big Henry was right superstitious about that 'dobe shack," said Smith, slowly, and weighing his words. "Mebby he believed in ghosts; but, anyhow, when he got enough liquor into him, he got a little loco on that subject. Acted like he was haunted, kinda."

He laughed coldly, contemptuously, shrugging his shoulders. Then he glanced at the slumped figure at the table, a thin smile of humorous contempt on his lean, hard face. Suddenly he flung up a hand.

"Everbody liquor on me," said the boss of Hell's Center.

X

DAVE SAUNDERS and Wyatt Duncan, true to their word, waited the agreed-upon two days, making a dry camp far back in the sage and down in a deep depression of the desert floor.

Nothing untoward occurred, and they broke camp on the morning of the third day, anticipating the rise of the sun by an hour. They soon found the trail pointed out to them by Felipe, and pushed forward into the lava wastes.

"Cassidy an' Ewalt ought to be purty well located by this time," said Wyatt, "an' have th' town well sized up. They're a couple of right good men, I'd say, from what I've seen an' heard."

"None better, I reckon," replied Dave.

The sun was at the meridian when Dave's restless glance flickered back to settle on a point well into the southwest. He regarded it steadily, studying it.

"Little wisp of dust crawlin' along over yonder," he said, gesturing with his free hand. "Movin' steady an' reg'lar. We better pull up, Wyatt, an' get cover. I don't like that sign a-tall."

Wyatt's reply was instant and silent obedience, and in a moment the two men were behind a lava ridge, their horses hidden farther back by a great mass of rock and greasewood. Dave's muttered curse as his hand grasped the hot metal of his rifle was echoed by his companion; calloused as their hands were, the heat struck through swiftly and made them wince.

"Comin' right along, an' comin' this way," muttered Wyatt. "If he holds like he's headin' he'll pass ahead of us, an' not cut our trail."

"Um-m!" grunted Dave. "Folks don't ride around out here aimlessly; he's likely headin' to cut this trail. If he is, question is: will he turn left an' go to town, or right an' head east, bound out?"

"Find out right soon," replied Wyatt.

The little streamer of dust grew steadily plainer and steadily nearer, and the two friends watched it closely, peering out through the brush which edged their position. A sugar-loaf sombrero moved past a dip in a distant lava billow, disappeared, showed again, and again disappeared. Then for an instant it appeared again through a thinning of the sage along the top of a ridge.

"Mex. hat," grunted Wyatt; "but that don't mean nothin' definite."

"No," growled Dave without shifting his eyes.

The hat showed again, and then the head of a buckskin pony pushed out into sight, and a Mexican rode into view. He was looking steadily ahead, his gaze on the ground, and as the faint trail came into sight, he nodded and drew up. For a moment he studied the sands, glanced swiftly up at the sun, and pushed on again, riding along the trail and bound east.

"Comin' our way, blast him!" growled Wyatt. His thumb moved gently, and a swift series of sharp clicks sounded under it as the rifle moved forward and upward.

"Don't!" whispered Dave. "Remember what El Toro said? This man is a Mexican."

"Uh-huh. Won't do no harm to have him restin' on th' front sight."

The oncoming rider espied the fresh tracks at a distance, which spoke well for the keenness of his eyesight, and he drew rein again, looking searchingly around him. One hand went slowly up, palm out, in the old, universal gesture of peace. After a moment he rode on again, the hand still upraised. Reaching the place where the fresh tracks turned from the trail, he stopped and looked along them until they were lost to sight. He smiled, and slowly lowered the hand.

"*Amigos!*" he called, and reached up to his hat band for a corn husk to make a cigarette.

Dave stood up, knowing that he was amply covered by his companion's rifle.

"*Amigo!*" he called. "Who are you?"

"Manuel. El Toro he e-spik of thees."

"Huh! He did, eh?"

"*Si.* Een three, four mile hav' a car-re, señor."

"Yeah."

"*Si.*" The Mexican, finishing his cigarette, lit it and drew slowly on it. "Thees tr-rail, eet go str-raight. Beeg r-rock of lava, like thees!" He thrust a finger straight up in the air. "Wat you call needle r-rock, *si*?"

"A needle rock three or four miles farther on," said Dave. "We want to look out, huh?"

"*Si.* Hav' a car-re, señor." The Mexican kneed his horse and pushed slowly on again, still heading eastward, out of the desert. "*Adiós, señores.*

Go weeth God."

"Same to you," said Dave, sinking back into the cover. "Well," he growled, glancing at his companion. "Have a care, huh?"

"Circle," grunted Wyatt. "Sentry, mebby. Question is, shall we go 'round him an' let him alone, or——"

"We'll circle him, anyhow; th' rest will mebby decide itself. If he lets us alone, why——"

"Uh-huh. North or south?"

"Don't know th' durn country. It's a toss-up."

"Th' Mex. came from th' south," cogitated Wyatt. "Wonder if he is square?" He thought for a moment. "Might be sendin' us in to somethin'."

Dave shook his head.

"He wouldn't 'a' bothered to hunt us out in that case. As soon as he saw we were headin' right on along th' trail he could 'a' just laid low an' let us go. North or south: want to toss for it?"

"Mebby. How you figgerin'?"

"Well, th' Mex. came from th' south an' th' sentry might 'a' seen him. In that case he might be extra vigilant. I vote for th' north."

"Right. North she is," grunted Wyatt. He carelessly let his wrist touch the barrel of the rifle, and swore wholeheartedly. "Can fry aigs on this gun!"

"Wish we had some to fry," chuckled Dave, going to the horses.

In a moment they were in the saddle again and riding on, but this time they had abandoned the trail and were swinging into the north, with a westward drift. Then they swung west with a northward drift.

On they rode, keeping off of skylines. Then Dave, drawing rein, dismounted on a clean-swept floor of lava and walked up the slope. He removed his Stetson and peered over the rim of the ridge. After a moment he retraced his steps and joined his companion.

"Looks like th' needle rock, off yonder about half a mile," he reported. "We ain't been raisin' much dust, but we have been makin' some. What you say we hobble th' hosses, move aside a couple of hundred yards, an' wait a little while? Give him time to make his play in case he's located our dust?"

"Yeah. I'll keep on goin' with th' hosses, to keep th' dust a-risin'. Say two hundred yards. Then I'll circle 'round an' 'round. If that don't make him curious, I don't know what will. You keep me covered, an' take care of him."

"He'll mebby let loose at you at long range, before I can get sight of him," objected Dave.

"Th' way these heat waves are wigglin', he'll shore as heck miss me at long range," replied Wyatt. "Anyhow, you cut in on foot, between me an' that rock." He chuckled. "It strikes me that we're takin' a lot for granted; we ain't shore that there's anybody out here but us."

"Or how many," countered Dave.

"Hum! Or how many," repeated Wyatt. "*Durn!* That's different! I ain't ridin' 'round in no circles, Dave. I'll cache th' hosses an' take to th' brush, west of you. We both watch south, but we don't get too far away from th' animals. I ain't hankerin' to hoof it into Hell's Center, not even in th' cool of th' night. High-heeled boots was never made for this kinda footin'."

"All right: go ahead. If there's anybody down there, an' he saw our dust, he'll likely be halfway here by now. Jump into it!"

The sand was hot, but the lava was hotter, and unbelievably sharp and cruel. Dave wriggled through the sage and the greasewood, careful not to brush against the stems to set the upper twigs to swaying. He had covered perhaps two hundred yards on a southwestwardly course when the faint clatter of a rolling stone somewhere ahead of him made him freeze.

"Dang greaser's wanderin' about out here," came a growled protest. "An' I would 'a' swore he kept on goin' east."

Dave could not see the sentry, but he did get a quick glimpse of Wyatt crawling along the bottom of a lava billow; and a sudden grunt of surprise and satisfaction in front of him told him that the sentry had seen the same thing. Wyatt could not be missed at that short range, and Dave, to distract the sentry's attention from Wyatt and center it on something nearer at hand, coughed loudly, heard an exclamation in front and a sudden snapping of a twig behind him, and whirled to look into the muzzle of a gun.

"Got him, Bill," called the outlaw. "C'mere!" He scowled at Dave. "Drop that gun!"

Dave had one chance: Wyatt evidently had not been seen. He pretended anger, and raised his voice loudly enough to carry to the ears of his friend.

"What you mean, throwin' down on me like this?" he demanded, the rifle falling from his hand. With Wyatt loose things were not as bad as they might be.

"What *you* mean, prowlin' 'round out here?" retorted the other.

Dave thought swiftly: it was possible that they had cut the trail, and that at least one of them knew that there were two horses. He must account for the extra horse, and account for it naturally, if he wished to keep Wyatt's presence from them.

"Me prowlin'? I'm packin' in, prospectin'," retorted Dave, still angrily. "If that hoss gets away in th' brush, an' spills that pack all over the place, you'll shore wish you'd minded yore own durn business! Askin' me what I'm doin' on a desert! Then what *you* doin' in here, for that matter?"

There sounded a rustle at Dave's side, and he glanced around to see the second man emerge from the brush.

"*He* ain't no greaser!" said the newcomer, pushing free from the sage. "What you doin' in here, stranger?"

"There *you* go," snapped Dave. "I'm prospectin', if it's any of yore business!"

"It's our business, all right. You've come in so far that we can't let you go back. Sorry, but it's yore hard luck." The speaker reached toward his holster and drew out a gun. "Don't like to do this, a-tall, stranger; but it's got to be did." He shook his head. "There ain't nothin' personal in it: you just horned in where you don't belong. We dassn't let you go out ag'in."

He raised the gun slowly and reluctantly, Dave watching like a hawk; and then there sounded the vicious crack of a rifle from the brush to the west. The whine of the bullet, striking a rock to the left of the three men, turned into a scream and ricocheted into silence.

It was a precious instant. Just for the merest fraction of a second the rising gun wavered as the attention of its holder and that of his companion was taken by the new threat; and in that bare fraction Dave Saunders showed the quality of the stuff that was in him; the stuff which had turned a lawless gold camp into one of law and order.

Twisting sidewise, his hands streaked downward, and up again. There came two spurts of fire, but only one crash, from his hips, as both guns went into action at the same instant. It was a beautiful draw. He stepped back out of the spreading smoke and peered down searchingly, and then took another backward step as he slid the guns into their sheaths.

The crashing of brush behind him told of Wyatt's frantic and careless efforts for speed, and a panting voice, throwing caution to the wind, asked a fearful question.

"It's all right, Wyatt," called Dave, reassuringly. "That shot of yourn was just what I needed; that shot, an' me worryin' about a pack-hoss!"

"I missed!" panted Wyatt, stopping on the edge of the little open space. "Great —— —— ——! Missed *then*, by three, four feet!"

"You know what you said about th' wrigglin' heat waves," replied Dave, resting a hand on his friend's shoulder. "You missed: yes; but th' shot saved my life, just th' same. It was just as good as a hit. Man, I shore was countin' on you!"

"Mebby it was, but I'd feel a heck of a lot better if it had been a hit. Was that you that coughed?"

"Yes. It sounded like one of 'em was headin' yore way, an' I could see you right plain, myself. I figgered mebby *he* could, too, if he wasn't turned aside. *That* worked, all right; but they shore outguessed me: th' other feller had worked around behind me, an' he had me cold before I even knew that he was there."

Wyatt's eyes gleamed suddenly and a smile broke through his frown.

"So you coughed to get him away from me, huh?" he muttered. "I won't forget that, Dave."

"As it turned out it helped me more than it did you. Well, let's get to th' hosses, an' go on our way ag'in. I reckon we can strike back to th' trail now."

"Reckon so," grunted Wyatt, looking down at what lay upon the ground. "Dig a hole or two before we go?" he asked, frowning.

"There ain't no loose rocks to pile over th' holes," said Dave. "Coyotes an' wolves would dig 'em out before midnight. Anyhow, remembering that kid's story, back there in Bulltown, I don't feel like buryin' none of that gang. Come on: let's get goin'."

Get going they did; and it did not take them long to find the trail again. They found it just west of the needle rock, and they found the prints of two horses at the same time.

"Wait a minute," growled Dave, pulling up. "If those two fellers were located at th' needle rock as sentries, then here's two more that we ain't seen. We got to find out about this, Wyatt. If these tracks were made by two others, then they'll find th' sentries missin', wait for 'em a little while, an' then mebby go off huntin' for 'em. *That* won't do!"

"No!" growled Wyatt. "It shore won't; an' mebby these two were goin' out to relieve th' others. This shore looks right scrambled to me, Dave."

"Yeah; an' we've got to unscramble it, an' do it pronto. Cache th' hosses ag'in: this is once more we got to go on foot, an' if we don't do a better job

of scoutin' this time than we did last, we better just fold up an' die!"

An hour later they again met near the hidden horses, both smiling.

"Them two wasn't no sentries, I reckon," said Wyatt in relief.

"No. They was ridin' out, headin' for civilization, an' evidently drew up to rest their hosses. Th' Mex. saw 'em, figgered that we'd bump right into 'em, an' passed us th' warnin'. They must 'a' been right suspicious, to see our dust sign an' investigate like they did."

"Well, that's *their* hard luck," growled Wyatt. "If they'd minded their own business they'd be alive, right now."

They mounted and rode on again, each turning things over in his mind. They had disposed of the outlaws' horses and equipment, and the trail itself behind them held no menace for their safety. The hours dragged past with the grudging miles, both very laggard.

XI

BILL AND PANHANDLE noticed a marked difference over the day before in the matter of their reception by those of their fellow-citizens who chanced to be astir at the comparatively early hour of eleven a.m. The owner, operator, and food architect of the greasy lunchroom hastened forward to open the door with his own hands when he saw the two friends approach his place of business.

"*Good*-mornin'," he beamed, led the way to a corner table, drew back the chairs, and dutifully pushed them in under his guests. "An' what'll it be this mornin'?" he asked through a villainous smile which was meant to be friendly.

"Ham'n aigs," grunted Bill. "An'," he added, "this is one mornin' when I want 'em like I tell you: ham well done, an' th' aigs soft with th' yolks whole."

"Yo're goin' to git 'em just that way—*if* th' durn yolks don't bust an' run!" assured the proprietor. "An' what'll you have, mister?" he asked deferentially, turning to Panhandle.

"Them specifications suit me," growled Panhandle.

"Keno!" said the proprietor, and made speed toward the stove.

The ham squizzled, and then came the sounds of breaking egg shells, too often repeated. After a wait longer than usual, the cook appeared with a plate in each hand, and an apologetic, half-fearful smile on his swarthy face.

"Used every aig I got, but they all busted an' run," he said. "There's somethin' wrong with aigs, out in this country: th' yolks don't herd by themselves."

"Lonesome, mebby," suggested Panhandle.

"Where you get 'em?" asked Bill, well knowing what the answer would be.

"Kansas City, by express."

"Uh-huh," grunted Bill, sniffing over his plate. "It's a wonder they don't bust right outa th' shells an' blow up th' pack mules. Well, if they don't herd close, then they don't. How many did you bust?"

"Eight: I'm expectin' more by th' next pack train."

"Cook 'em all an' bring 'em here: we'll eat 'em."

"Keno. Now I'll git yore coffee, friends."

Panhandle glanced across the table at his companion. Up to now it had been "strangers"; but now it was "friends." They exchanged grins and fell to work.

After breakfast they wandered down to the Palmer House. They were greeted with unusual cheeriness by the ex-pugilist, and they accepted his invitation, eager to change the clinging flavor of the eggs.

They wiped their lips and looked casually around. Two men were in a corner, talking in what sounded like low grunts, and as the eyes of Bill and his companion grew accustomed to the poorer light of the room, they picked out the identity of the two strangers. They saw Dave Saunders and Wyatt Duncan.

"—— —— ham an' —— —— breakfast!" Dave was saying, scowling at everything within his arc of vision. His eyes settled on the curious faces of the two men at the bar, and his scowl deepened.

"Th' ham wasn't so bad, but —— —— th' aigs!" said Wyatt. "My teeth are full of fuzzy feathers!"

"Liquor up, strangers," invited the ex-pugilist, waving for them to come forward. "Want you to meet a couple of friends of mine," he added as a further inducement.

"Come on, Wyatt," said Dave, arising. "Mebby they can tell us where to get some decent food."

"Hope so!" exclaimed Wyatt, trailing after.

"Meet Bill an' Panhandle," said the bartender, waving to each of those persons in turn.

"Howdy," said Dave, nodding. "You can call me Dave. Meet my friend, Wyatt."

Grunts and nods rounded out this part of the formality, and four raised glasses sealed it. Dave placed his on the bar, tasted his mouth experimentally, and grinned. The change in flavor was a little improvement.

"Where do you boys eat?" he asked, abruptly.

Bill gravely told him, adding that there were no more eggs.

"Shore glad to hear that!" breathed Wyatt fervently. "They must be all alike in this town."

"Be a good idear to start a hen ranch out in this part of th' country," said Wyatt, with a grin. "Serve meals right on th' ranch—ham an' aigs. Th' boys would ride a hundred miles to eat 'em."

"An' th' coyotes would come two hundred to eat th' hens," chuckled Dave. "You'd have to make a lattice fence outa barb wire, an' run her twenty feet down into th' ground. By th' way," he said, smiling with a trace of apology, "I ain't heard nobody say th' name of this town, yet!"

"Hell's Center," said the bartender, rinsing the glasses.

"An' well named," supplemented Panhandle. "We've been here two nights an' seen four men killed in this room."

"Y'don't say!" exclaimed Wyatt. "What's th' trouble?"

"Don't know that I can put a handle to it, bein' a stranger," replied Bill; "but I'm right shore of one thing: when trouble starts, an' it starts easy, watch everybody!"

"Huh! Kinda takes a feller back to Newton, Dodge, an' them cow-towns," murmured Wyatt, "in th' days when them towns was *towns*. Here's where I mind my own business more than ever. What you say, Dave?"

"I say *keno*!" answered Dave with emphasis. "Four dead men in two nights! Well, well, well!"

"Bill, here," said the ex-pugilist, jerking a crooked thumb in the direction of the redhead, "got two of 'em last night. I've seen a cat move when it was in a hurry; but Bill makes a cat look slow."

"It's a nice day if it don't get no hotter, an' th' wind don't blow," said Bill, uncomfortably. "Which means, let's all have a drink, an' change th' subject."

"This round's on me, friend," said Dave. "You two boys on th' drift?"

"What you mean?" asked Bill, coldly.

"Not nothin' that I hadn't oughta," quickly explained Dave, suddenly remembering the interpretation that could be placed on the word "drift." "I just thought that mebby you two fellers was like us: tumbleweedin' from one job to th' next. Sorta driftin' *careless*-like."

"Well, we're driftin' careless," grunted Bill, holding up the glass in silent salutation. "Me an' Panhandle play cards for a livin', mostly; which is all th' warnin' we aim to give. Here's luck!"

"Luck!" echoed the others, and the heads went back in unison; but there seemed to be a trace of coolness in the words and attitudes of Dave and his friend.

"How come you an' Wyatt got in here?" asked the curious bartender, bluntly.

"We run up ag'in that lava rim, an' got mighty sick of flankin' it," came the ready answer. "We wanted to travel west, an' there it was, mile after mile. Then we got mad, an' struck straight across, an' here we are."

"Meet anybody?" asked the bartender curiously.

"Nobody but a greaser," answered Dave. "He said we was off th' trail, but didn't tell us where it was."

"Blundered onto th' trail later," explained Wyatt, speaking directly to the bartender. "There was fresh signs of two horses on it, headin' east. We hoped it would lead us to water, which they usually do if you foller 'em long enough. This time we was double lucky: we hit water an' liquor, both: but we won't say nothin' about them aigs."

"They shore spoke for themselves," growled Dave. He faced Bill and Panhandle, and nodded casually. "Reckon me an' Wyatt will go out an' look th' town over. See you all later."

Wyatt nodded and followed his friend out of the building.

"Sorta offish, all of a sudden," remarked the bartender, looking out through the open door.

"Yeah," grunted Panhandle, emerging from a moment's deep thought. "Yeah," he repeated, and shrugged his shoulders expressively. "You tell some folks that yo're a professional gambler, an' they get stiff-backed; but give 'em a chance to trim th' gamblers, an' they don't waste no time shovin' in their chips an' crowdin' th' table."

The bartender flashed a quick, guarded look at Panhandle's friend, and saw no particular expression on the cold face. He sighed, picked up the bar cloth, and started to move it gently back and forth over the counter. Then he leaned forward suddenly and spoke in a low voice.

"Seen Steve Smith this mornin'?" he asked.

Bill stirred and looked at him curiously.

"No; have you?"

"No. Steve oughta be in a right good humor," replied the bartender. He regarded the moving cloth for a moment, and then looked up. "Th' new boss ain't as can-tankerous as th' old one; but he's twict as poisonous: an' he *never* gets drunk."

"Huh!" said Bill, thoughtfully. "Just what was th' matter with Big Henry, actin' like he did to Panhandle? Was he a little loco?"

"Mebby—on one subject. You see, him an' some of th' boys—oh, well," said the bartender, suddenly remembering what had happened to certain

people who talked too much. "Oh, well: that's somethin' that happened before you fellers got here. Ain't no use to open up no graves; *but*," he said, speaking very earnestly, "don't you start no talk about that little 'dobe shack you was honin' to hire." He squirmed in his clothes as if his thoughts had suddenly become distasteful. "Don't you do it, *never*!"

"All right," replied Bill in a bored voice. "We won't. I don't know what th' hell yo're talkin' about—an' I don't care. Feel like movin' along, Panhandle?"

"Where to?" asked Panhandle, with justifiable curiosity. "What's th' use of millin' around aimless? I'm in favor of holdin' down a chair an' takin' things easy."

Bill grunted his casual affirmation and led the way to a table, and soon the two friends were idly playing Seven-Up. An hour or two later Dave and Wyatt returned, went to the bar, drank by themselves, and sought out a table of their own; and it was the table farthest removed from that of the two professional gamblers.

So the afternoon passed in idleness and low talk, each pair keeping to its own table. Occasionally both groups entered into conversation with the bartender and with each other, but there was no shift in position, no attempt made to fraternize.

This unobtrusive aloofness, despite its unobtrusiveness, was noticed by the bartender who, catching Panhandle's eye, glanced knowingly at the aloof pair, raised his shoulders, grimaced, stuck his nose up in the air, and laughed silently. Panhandle wiped away an imaginary tear.

A shadow darkened the doorway, and an old man stopped on the sill, his heavily tanned, lined face thrust forward at the end of a long, skinny, and painfully corded neck. When he slowly and slyly removed his dilapidated sombrero he did not look much unlike an aged vulture. Satisfied that all was right and that he was safe, he stepped forward softly and suddenly raised his voice in a shrill, unearthly yell.

"Hi-i-i-i!"

The jumping bartender flashed one panicky glance at the maker of the sound, and then looked fearfully and hopefully at the strangers; he was all set to burst into laughter, but his expression slowly changed to aggrieved disappointment.

Panhandle turned lazily and calmly and looked the newcomer over as if he were looking at some strange animal.

"Locoed?" he asked in a quiet voice.

"Locoed," replied Bill. "Th' desert's shore got him."

The thin anticipatory cackle of the newcomer died out slowly, and his sad eyes had an accusing look. He shook his head sadly and sidled toward the bar, where a sympathetic dispenser of drinks shook his own head and sighed.

"They didn't stampede, Loco," he said. "Reckon mebby they ain't that kind. Don't you care, though: *I*'ll set 'em up for you, an' me an' you'll drink together. Devil with 'em, from their heads to their feet!"

"Devil with 'em," repeated Loco mechanically.

Dave Saunders arose and took a hesitant step, stopped, felt foolish, and then changed his actions into words.

"Was we supposed to jump an' act like a lot of durn fools?" he gently asked.

The bartender nodded, at the same time tapping his forehead.

"Well, then it's shore on me," admitted Dave, stepping forward again. "By rights it oughta be on me *twice*: I was so blame' scared I *couldn't* move!"

"Me neither," said Bill. "An' I ain't right shore that I've got over it yet. Look here, Loco: you shouldn't oughta go 'round scarin' folks half to death! It ain't right! You oughta be ashamed of yoreself!"

"Man!" exclaimed Panhandle, his knees trembling violently. "Right then I shore reckoned th' whole Apache tribe was reachin' for my hair!"

"It's a right good way to get hisself killed," muttered Wyatt, but he fell in with the play, and spoke loudly. "I ain't been able to speak up to now," he confessed; "but now I'm able to say that a round shore is on me. Don't you never do that ag'in, Loco!"

"He-he-he!" chuckled the ancient, jabbing the nearest man in the ribs. "He-he-he! I can allus fetch 'em! I can allus fetch—that is—that is—" his voice hushed as he peered fearfully around—"that is, all 'cept Big Henry." Fear flared up in his pale eyes. "*Big Henry!*" he whispered. "*Big Henry!*"

The bartender's face set, and then a smile broke through. It was a genuine smile. He leaned over the counter and beckoned with a huge forefinger.

"C'mere. C'mere, Loco. Want to tell you somethin'—somethin' special."

The old prospector leered knowingly at the four strangers, and tiptoed along the bar.

"Secret?" he whispered. "Secret?"

"Yeah, a secret. Big Henry's dead. He won't bother you no more. Big Henry's gone for good and I reckon there ain't nobody that's sorry."

The old man stood for a moment as if he had not heard, as if the words had no meaning for him; and then, cursing horribly, he whirled like a frightened rabbit and raced for the door.

The bartender found himself the focal point of four level gazes, and he tried to dissemble.

"Pore old feller! He went off without his drinks!"

Three of the four turned on their heels and walked back to the tables; but the fourth, leaning lazily against the bar, maintained the fixed gaze.

The ex-pugilist fidgeted, and then he glared.

"What's th' matter with you, Bill? Bellyache?" he demanded with spirit.

"Did you guess how it would affect him when you said it?"

"No. One of two things was due to happen, I reckoned. *That's* th' one that did. I should 'a' waited until after he had had his liquor; but he'll be back before closin' time, worse luck!"

"Where'll he go from here?" asked Bill purely as a matter of curiosity and to keep the talk going.

"Bill, I'd give ten dollars if I knowed that! I'll lay you ten that he goes to th' old 'dobe shack; or that he don't! Take yore pick."

"What was th' other way that you reckoned he mighta acted?" persisted Bill.

The ex-pugilist looked into the eyes of the stern-faced man across the counter; the gazes met and locked. An observer gifted richly with imagination might easily have substituted, in his mind's eye, thin and slithering blades of steel.

"Bill," said the barman, his hushed voice breaking the silence, "you never in all yore born days saw such a dumbhead as me; but I was kinda figgerin' on Loco laughin' hisself half to death."

"Because Big Henry is dead?"

"Yes. Because Big Henry is dead."

"An' that shack you mentioned: it's Loco's, of course?" said Bill, knowing that it was not.

"No. Yore partner's motionin' to you."

Bill turned his head slowly and looked at Panhandle's back. He waited a moment, and still Panhandle did not move.

Bill turned slowly and faced the bar.

"Much obliged," he said, and sauntered toward the door and the street.

The bartender watched Bill pass out through the doorway and wondered if the gambler was on Loco's trail; but he was instantly reassured by Bill's reëntry. The gambler walked up to the bar as if he had not just left it, looked the ex-pugilist in the eye, and stated a fact bluntly.

"Panhandle wasn't motionin' to me," he said confidently.

The ex-pugilist wondered if his companion had gone out into the street to discover that, looked humorously at the back of the person in question, and then gravely regarded his confrere across the counter.

"No?" he asked.

"No."

"My mistake, I reckon. You see where Loco went?"

"No. He must 'a' scurried out of sight like a rat."

"An' I hope to th' Lord he stays out of sight," said the bartender with fervor. "Why he ever come back to town I dunno. I grub-staked him strong enough to last him all summer. First thing we know, Loco will get killed."

"That so?"

"Yes!"

"Why?" asked Bill.

"Loco saw too much," replied the bartender. "He was a *little* loco before, but *plumb* loco after. Big Henry was superstitious, an' half-scared to death by what they done; that's why he got drunk so often; but Steve Smith ain't that kind. Some day he'll just pull his gun an' shoot Loco. He hates th' old man like pizen."

"You say he was loco before whatever it was happened?" asked Bill, his face devoid of any intelligent expression.

"Yes; but he's a lot worse since."

"What was it he saw?" asked Bill curiously.

"Panhandle's motionin' to you ag'in," said the ex-pugilist calmly.

Bill's gaze did not shift from the placid face before him, and he certainly did not look behind him to see what his friend was doing.

"Yeah; so I see," he replied. "Let him wave his fool arms off. It's a habit of his. What was it Loco saw?"

"Listen here, Bill," earnestly said the bartender and in a very low voice. "If I answer yore questions I'll be shot before I know it; an' so will you."

"Th' first part of that statement don't worry me much—you mebby deserve it; but th' last kinda sets crooked on me. I don't like that idear a-tall. By th' way, what's yore name?"

"Call me Spike."

"Spike," repeated Bill. "Loco's just a harmless old feller, ain't he?"

"Yes."

"Then why should anybody want to shoot him?" persisted Bill.

"He was an eye-witness to somethin' that wasn't very nice to see."

"Then why didn't they shoot him then an' there?"

"Because he was layin' on his belly out in th' brush, an' nobody knowed he was there. Afterward, they all was kinda sick at th' stomach." Spike paused, rubbed at the counter, and shook his head gently. "Big Henry was boss, an' he lost his nerve. You should 'a' seen him!"

He glanced quickly around, fearful of having been overheard. "Listen here, Bill! I ain't goin' to say no more. It's all over, an' nothin' can undo it; but I hope to heaven that every one of them pays for it, slow an' terrible!"

Bill was looking at the bartender shrewdly, and he leaned forward a little.

"Just one thing more, Spike," he said. "Was Loco th' only man that was crazy?"

"I heard there was a feller drove crazy then an' there, an' wandered out onto th' desert. Young feller. Never been seen since."

Bill nodded, a picture in his mind: the picture of a pitiable youth staggering into a saloon in Bulltown.

"A crazy man wouldn't have much chance out on this desert," he said. "Was he mounted?"

"No; afoot."

"No chance a-tall unless somebody found him an' led him off," Bill muttered. It must have been Loco who had acted as that guide.

"None whatever."

"Say, Spike, accordin' to Big Henry, some prospectors built this town, an' then abandoned it. Was Loco one of 'em?"

"Panhandle's motionin' ag'in," said Spike, and then he closed his mouth and kept it closed.

XII

TWO DAYS went by without anything of importance taking place. Loco had disappeared, much to Spike's relief. Spike, himself, had held aloof from the strangers, and had nothing to do with them outside of his duties at the bar.

The first night passed uneventfully, Bill and Panhandle playing poker in one corner of the room, with fairly successful results; Wyatt and Dave, playing at a table in the other end of the room, had become better acquainted with their poker adversaries; but neither pair took much interest in the other, and were never at any time in the same close group.

The second night was eventful. There were sounds in the street, suggesting that a cavalcade of fair size had ridden into town and stopped before the Palmer House. The crowd inside the saloon was full of movement: men came and went continually, and when each man returned there would be a smile of satisfaction on his face. Bill and Panhandle controlled their irritation at the constant interruption of the game, as man after man pocketed his chips, left, and returned to play again. Over in the other end of the room the same thing was taking place. And then, suddenly, there were no more interruptions. The games settled down to the regular, quiet affairs; but at both tables bills of large denominations began to appear.

A group of six men came into the room and lined up at the bar, laughing in rare good humor and talking loudly. One of them was Steve Smith, but the others were strangers to Bill and Panhandle. During the play both Bill and his friend kept their ears open to the talk at the bar, and little by little the identities of the five newcomers were revealed. George White, Tom Walters, Paso Frank, Longhorn and Lefty: the first three names checking with those in their memorized list. The men had returned from some foray and were now celebrating its successful outcome. The sudden influx of new money was suspicious in itself; but coupled with the return of these bandits it took on a greater suspicion which amounted, in Bill's mind, to a certainty. Somewhere a bank had been robbed or a train held up.

Ten o'clock came and went, and more strange faces appeared in the room. There were consultations at the bar and in corners, low-voiced and somewhat furtive. Hilarity steadily climbed, and Spike was a very busy man. There was an argument in a corner, which suddenly flared into high-pitched words.

". . . split his share equal!" roared a coarse voice. "*Equal*, I say!"

Steve Smith raised a hand and pushed the man back, pushed roughly, with force.

"Equal nothin'!" he snapped, his cold eyes glinting. "Th' boss's share goes to th' boss, an' *I*'m boss *now*!"

The talk died down and went on in voices so low that the words did not carry. Bill and Panhandle took their cards and played them without emotion, apparently giving no attention to anything outside the game; Dave and Wyatt, at their own table, did the same thing; but both pairs watched each other without appearing to do so.

Midnight came, and with it came another outside interruption and four more men. Two hard-faced strangers came first, and then the tired and serious faces of Johnny Nelson and Matt Skinner. Shouts of welcome met their entry, shouts of welcome for the first two; and curious, suspicious, and questioning glances for the second two. Tom Jones and Bill Nolan were old friends, returning from San Ignacio with pack-horse loads of good liquor and other supplies; their two companions were strangers and, therefore, not very welcome.

"Mostly rye, I hope, Tom!" called a man from a corner, raising a welcoming hand.

"Brandy, Tom! Huh?" shouted another. "Did you git brandy?"

Tom waved to both friends, a smile wreathing his face.

"Got two loads of each," he reassured them. "Got everythin': mescal, gin, whisky, an' brandy. You boys don't have to worry none. You can drink yoreselves blind, an' stay blind."

He lined up with his three companions, and after the liquid ceremonies were concluded faced the room and waved widely at the two strangers.

"Fellers, meet Matt an' Johnny: two old hands of th' trail. They beat a posse acrost th' Rio Grande, an' now they're workin' their way north ag'in. Two good boys."

"What do you know about 'em, aside from guessin'?" asked a voice in the crowd, a suspicious and trouble-making voice.

"Nothin', you durn fool," retorted Tom easily. "El Toro says they're all right, an' that's good enough for me."

"An' it's good enough for you, friend," drawled Matt, insolently, eying the objector.

"Is that so?"

"You mind yore own business, an' lemme mind my own!" snorted Matt, and he threw his arm around the shoulder of the advancing man, and dragged him up against the counter. "Liquor don't bother me a-tall," he confided in a blurred, unsteady voice. "Us fellers has been lightenin' one of them pack loads ever since we crossed th' river, an' th' blasted ropes was more numerous every time we done 'em up ag'in. Between th' mescal, an' th' brandy, an' th' whisky an' th' gin, I'm a little mite uncertain. Just a couple more drinks an' I'm goin' to bed." He staggered, swayed gently, tried to sing and, looking around with a strange expression on his face, folded up like a jack knife, slipped to the floor, and passed out. No one but Johnny and himself knew that, as the pack train had moved across the desert in the darkness, they both had spilled their liquor on the thirsty sands.

Bill Nolan and Tom Jones, being remarkably sober at the end of such a long, wet trip, apparently had done the same thing; but they were quite certain that the two strangers never could pick up that trail and follow it to Hell's Center.

"Liquor don't bother him a-tall," jeered Johnny, lurching toward his prostrate friend, and he, himself, almost collapsed.

They helped Johnny, himself woefully in need of help, pick up the unconscious Matt, and the little group staggered out of the door and into the night.

So it was that Johnny Nelson and his friend, Matt Skinner, came to Hell's Center, to round out the full half-dozen and to take their share of the troubles which the future had in store for them.

The sun had passed the meridian before Johnny and Matt emerged into the sight of men; and a more woebegone pair seldom had crossed the threshold of the Palmer House.

"Oh, my; oh, my!" sighed Matt, leaning against the counter, his pathetic face turned beseechingly toward the bartender. "Hair of th' dog," he pleaded. "Oh, my; oh, my!"

"Which dog?" asked Spike, grinning.

"Huh?"

"Which dog?" repeated Spike, the grin growing. "Brandy, whisky, gin, or mescal?"

"Oh, Lordy!" sighed Matt, turning to his equally woebegone friend for inspiration. "Which'll it be, Johnny?"

"Don't you ask me no questions," growled that unfortunate person, closing his eyes for a moment. "Don't make me think, Matt."

"Then I reckon it oughta be a mongrel," suggested Spike, taking four bottles from the back bar in quick succession. There was an eagerness in his movements which suggested the earnest experimentalist. "Just how it's goin' to work, I dunno," he frankly confessed. He favored each bottle equally, and the two glasses which he shoved toward the outer edge of the counter seemed to have a fascination for him. "There: try *that* combination," he suggested, hopefully.

Matt lifted the glass, tasted it, made a wry face, and downed the dose. His eyes rolled and he shuddered.

"Tastes like moldy leather on fire!"

"Th' moldy leather part is mostly yore mouth, I reckon," said the bartender, watching the other sufferer. "Try it, Johnny: go ahead!" he urged.

Johnny sighed, obeyed, put the glass back on the bar, and wiped the tears from his eyes.

"It don't taste like nothin' I ever tasted before," he said; "but it shore is on fire. Listen, Spike, there wasn't nothin' died recent in any of them bottles, was there?"

A snicker from the room became the focal point of three indignant pairs of eyes; but after brief and pugnacious scrutiny of the abashed Dave, the eyes returned to the empty glasses.

"Want another?" asked Spike with professional keenness.

"No!" exclaimed Matt.

"Not while I can shoot!" retorted Johnny, waving his hand. "Try one yoreself," he suggested.

"Shore," said Matt. "See what *you* think of it."

Spike reached for the bottles again and poured himself a very sparing drink of the combination in question, tasted it, held the flavor for a moment, tasted it again, and nodded with pride.

"Boys, I've shore discovered somethin'," he boasted. "I've just invented th' Hell's Center Snorter!"

"Couple of those will shore make th' drinker think of leavin' town pronto," growled Johnny. "Man, that'll take th' hair off a hide an' tan it at th' same time." He spat violently.

"I tell you, that's yore mouth," said the indignant Spike, looking around for some victim whose mouth was normal. His gaze settled on Bill. "Come

up an' try this drink, Bill," he hopefully invited.

"My stomach's too delicate," said Bill, diffidently.

"Yeah, you look it," said Matt unpleasantly.

"Climb down, Matt," said Johnny, resting a hand on his friend's arm. "I shore wish you'd let liquor alone!" Then Johnny turned an unfriendly face toward the table. "What Matt said goes for me," he announced, pointedly.

"Here! Here!" said Spike, hurriedly, picturing Bill in action. "Bill's a friend of mine," he asserted.

"Yo're shore welcome to him," growled Matt. "Hey! What's th' use of standin' up here all day? What's th' matter with that table over there?" he asked, indicating a table midway along the wall and halfway between the tables occupied by Bill and Panhandle, Dave and Wyatt.

"What you say to a little game of draw, friends?" asked Panhandle, with the professional gambler's readiness to increase his cash reserve. He was smiling in sudden friendship.

Matt looked at the speaker, ignored him, and led the way to the middle table, selecting a chair which faced the two gamblers.

"Offish!" growled Panhandle, settling back comfortably.

"What you say?" asked Matt, quickly.

"Oh, keep quiet, you durn fool!" said Johnny, looking at his companion in strong disapproval. "Don't you know that we're strangers in here? Sober up!"

"Glad we are!" growled Matt, frowning. "That's th' way I'm figgerin' to stay, too."

"An'," said Spike to himself, "if you keep on actin' like a sore pup, that shore is th' way you *will* stay!"

Night came, and with it the nightly influx. The room became crowded with rough, jostling men. Spike and his assistant had all they could do to handle the business; and Spike's temper, never too good under the stress of hard work, was further edged by the many curt refusals to try his new drink. No one cared to sample it, and his artistic soul was offended. Somebody suggested that he try it on Loco, and this was an idea that he cherished. He would try it on the crazy old prospector and observe the result.

The night was half over when Steve Smith came in, followed by two men who were known as Lefty and Longhorn individually; and as the two L's collectively. The three men headed straight for the table in the rear of the

room where Bill and Panhandle were making a few honest dollars more or less dishonestly. With the appearance of these three men a singular thing happened.

The three men who were playing with Bill and Panhandle, scooping up their chips, regretted that they had to quit, and moved away from the table as the three newcomers neared it. The whole thing shouted that it was prearranged, and Bill and his friend smiled at each other. Evidently the two L's were poker experts.

Smith waved his companions into two of the vacated chairs and took the third himself.

"Told you fellers we was goin' to find out just what kinda poker players you are," he said, grinning at the two gamblers. "Meet Lefty an' Longhorn, collar-an'-elbow poker champeens; boys, meet Bill an' Panhandle." He smiled again at the two gamblers. "You fellers shore are goin' to have some tough sleddin' purty soon. Us three have got most of th' money in th' world; an' here's a sample," he said, placing a roll of new, crisp yellowbacks on the table at his elbow. Not a bill was creased or soiled. His two companions duplicated the movement, and grinned.

Bill showed an expressionless face to the newcomers while he dug down into his pockets. Panhandle was going through the same movements, and in a moment the table looked as if it had broken away from a mint and drifted out here on the desert.

The room hummed with conversation, punctuated by the click of chips or the ring of gold and silver coins.

". . . five better," said Panhandle, raising his eyebrows and the pot at the same time.

No one noticed Loco sidle into the room and head for the bar; no one but Spike, and he welcomed the unfortunate by reaching behind him for four bottles on the back bar.

"Either you helped or you didn't," said Lefty, expressing a poker axiom. "Th' last time, you didn't. I'll see," he said, and then swore and tossed his cards on the table. "An' Steve asked us to help him trim a couple of suckers! Suckers, huh!"

"I didn't hear you refuse!" retorted Smith, picking up the cards.

"You wait till you ask me ag'in, an' you will," replied Lefty. "You'll hear me then, loud an' plain." He pushed back from the table, tightly gripping the lone bill remaining of the roll he had brought into the game.

"I'm goin' up an' play stud with th' yearlin's; an' as a matter of fact, weaners would suit me better."

"Why, Lefty: you can play stud right here, if th' others are willin'," offered Panhandle with great affability.

"Shore," said Bill, grinning. "Go borrow some money an' come right back."

"You go to blazes," said Lefty. "Didn't I say I was lookin' for nothin' stronger than yearlin's? Come on, Longhorn: let's git out of this while we've got our shirts left."

Steve Smith leaned back, watching his two friends weave through the crowd. He was chuckling. His own roll was about the same as it had been when he entered the game.

"When it comes to makin' a livin' at this game, I reckon you two boys can manage to struggle along," he said, with a chuckle. "But I ain't so pore, myself," he boasted, indicating his own roll.

"Hold it, Loco!" came a sudden yell from the bar, and startled eyes looked up to see Loco hopping up and down like the crazy man he was. The old man, stimulated by several of Spike's new concoctions, had lost what raveling of sense he had, and with it went all instinct for self-preservation. He looked wildly around, saw Steve Smith, and started toward him on a sidling lope, yelling at the top of his lungs. Spike's frantic lunge carried him across the bar and he fell to the floor on the other side.

"Killed her, he did!" he shrilled in a crackling falsetto. "Killed her, he did! Killed her with his gun, like th' others did! Killed——"

Smith leaped to his feet, his face like a thundercloud, his hand streaking downward. The gun was free from the holster when Bill's hand gripped it and twisted it back and to one side.

The roar was deafening and for a moment the smoke hid the weapon. The struggle ceased suddenly and Bill stepped back, the gun in his right hand. Smith stood poised on the balls of his feet, trembling with rage. The crowd stood breathless, not a man moving.

"Bad luck, I tell you!" came Bill's soft voice. "It's bad luck to shoot a crazy man, Steve! Let th' pore old locoed cuss alone. He don't mean nothin', not nothin' a-tall. Here, sit down, Steve; sit down, an' calm down."

"You gimme my gun!" whispered Smith, his eyes blazing.

"Shore, Steve; *I* don't want it," replied Bill. "Here, take it an' slip it back into th' holster. Loco didn't mean no harm."

Smith took the extended weapon by the muzzle, as it was presented to him. His finger slid into the trigger guard, and suddenly the gun spun into a roll; but as it did so, Bill's hand, gambling with death, moved like a flash and struck the moving handle. There came a heavy explosion, and the bullet intended for Bill as the muzzle swung around, being fired prematurely while the weapon was pointing the wrong way, ranged up under Smith's short ribs and dropped him like the stroke of an axe.

"There, by gosh!" said Bill sorrowfully, looking around at the strained faces. "I was afraid one of us would get hurt. He was rollin' her an' when I tried to grab it my hand struck th' butt. If I could 'a' got a good hold on it—oh, well: it's done!"

Tom Walters, who stood next in line for the dead man's job of boss, and the dead man's greater share of booty because of the office, nodded his head and stepped forward from the crowd. His quick glance at the frightened and seemingly paralyzed Loco was full of hatred, but he tried to mask it. *This* time Loco had worked to the advantage of Walters; but he would kill the old fool at the first good opportunity.

"I don't know that you shoulda interfered, Bill," said Walters; "but you did, an' it's all done now. I'm boss of this outfit, an' I'm tellin' you plain that you don't never want to cut into any play that I make. That's good advice; an' it's a warnin'. Don't you *never* cut in *a-tall*!"

Walters turned, waved a hand at the body, and indicated three men. They stepped forward to do their work as Walters' voice rang out in an invitation for everybody to drink to the new boss.

Loco, bewildered, frightened back to somewhere near sobriety, inched forward toward the frowning and disheartened Bill. The old man crept along the edge of the table, peered for an instant into the seamed face of the gambler, let his hand rest lightly for a moment on the broad, sloping shoulder and then, wheeling in sudden panic, the old prospector dashed away like a frightened bird.

Bill looked after him with kindly eyes, watching until the old man had slipped through the door to safety; and then, his glance roving over the crowd at the bar, for one instant rested on Spike's bruised but complacent face.

Spike seemed to be very well satisfied about something; as, indeed, he was. Bill, by saving the old man's life, had made a staunch friend.

This was one of the times when another friend might not come in amiss; he had, personally, accounted for his share of the men on the list, not to

mention two incidental scoundrels, in an even break. It might be well, now, if he sat back awhile to keep suspicion from raising its ugly head; to sit back and let some of the others take a more active part in the game. He was becoming a very prominent citizen of Hell's Center.

XIII

JOHNNY NELSON and Matt Skinner well knew the grisly story concerning the adobe hut over in the bottoms. They also had sensed and fully realized the superstitious fear which gripped Tom Walters and some of his closest friends. For awhile this knowledge lay dormant in the minds of both and aroused only contemptuous interest; it lay dormant until one forenoon, when they wandered into the general store to lay in a supply of their favorite brand of tobacco. Their purchases made and sampled, they leaned lazily against the worn counter, idly swapping gossip with the proprietor, their eyes roving carelessly about the store.

"They shore are a godsend to desert hombres," said Matt, speaking of canned tomatoes. The proprietor was engaged in opening a case, and had casually mentioned that he sold more canned tomatoes than any other one vegetable in his stock.

"Yeah," agreed Johnny, his restless glance passing and then returning to settle upon a soldering iron hanging from two nails driven close together in an upright supporting shelves on each side of it.

"Ain't nothin' better for thirst, I reckon," agreed the proprietor.

"Yeah," said Johnny, his thoughts centering upon and revolving around that soldering iron. He was regarding it curiously and became aware of other things close by it. Yes, that was right. His expression changed abruptly as an idea exploded in his mind. He wiped off the grin and backed along the counter. Catching Matt's placid eye, he motioned swiftly and significantly, and found that Matt was as quick in his mind as he was with his hands.

"Here, old-timer," said Matt, moving toward the crate and pleasantly shoving the proprietor along one side of it until that person's back was turned to Johnny. "What's the use of liftin' out them cans an' totin' 'em a couple at a time? Grab hold of yore end an' we'll lift th' whole case an' put it where you want it."

"But," expostulated the proprietor, hurriedly getting his feet out of the way, "but I don't want th' hull crate—*hey*! What you want to spill 'em for?" he demanded with some asperity, reaching hastily for a rolling can. "*I* don't want th' crate on th' shelves! Who asked you to horn in like this? *Now* look at 'em!"

"Shucks!" growled Matt contritely, herding two of the cans with his feet. "Seems like I'm allus blunderin'. Oh, well; they won't bust, an' they won't

leak. Here! Lemme help you," and he hastily began to pick up the cans, his elbow knocking three from the crook of the proprietor's arm. "Now, *ain't* I clumsy?"

"Clumsy!" snorted the red-faced proprietor with deep feeling. "Clumsy! If you had as many feet as a cow, this shore would be a hopeless job. I didn't ask you for no help in th' first place, did I? You get outa here, an' let 'em alone!"

"Well, you don't have to go on th' prod!" expostulated Matt. "I only wanted to help you."

Johnny, his hands now thrust deep into his side coat pockets, leaned against the counter and laughed. He carelessly flipped his half-burned cigarette through the air, and it landed in a nail keg.

The proprietor, having followed the curving missile with his eyes, turned abruptly and glared at the thrower.

"You see where that lit?" he demanded with frank roughness. "What—"

"Gosh, yes!" admitted Johnny, contritely, as he stepped swiftly forward to retrieve it. "But I don't reckon it'll set no nails on fire," he growled, plunging his hand into the keg, as Matt knocked over a pile of tomato cans.

"No! But it might 'a' set fire to th' keg, you jackass!" retorted the proprietor, turning quickly at the sound of the falling cans.

Johnny dropped the butt on the floor, ground it with a heel, and looked at his friend. He was hurt and indignant.

"Come on, Matt: let's get outa here till th' old man sweetens up, or before you upset everythin' in th' place."

"What was all th' ruckus about, anyhow?" asked Matt when the store was safely behind them.

Johnny moved a hand out of a pocket, spreading the receptacle wide open for his companion's inspection.

Matt bent over, looked into the pocket, and glanced up curiously, thinking hard and fast.

"Well, what's *that* for?" he asked.

"Look in th' other one," suggested Johnny, swinging part way around and obligingly spreading open the other pocket.

Matt obeyed, studied the contents of the pocket for a moment, straightened up, and fell into step.

"I was born dumb," he confessed, scratching his head.

"An' never got over it, huh?"

"Reckon not," sighed Matt. He checked off the items on his fingers, and then looked up suddenly, a broad smile on his face. "Yeah?" he inquired with a rising inflection. "I'm gettin' th' drift!"

"Yeah," replied Johnny, grinning.

"By gosh!" said Matt. He scratched his head again, cogitating. "To-night?" he asked, hopefully.

"Yeah; to-night."

"Think it'll work?" asked Matt.

"Worth tryin', anyhow," said Johnny. "What you think?"

"Gosh, yes! I betcha—I betcha it will!"

They walked on another dozen steps, and then Matt slowed, looking at his companion inquiringly.

"Listen, Johnny: this oughta be well talked over—we don't want to blunder." Again he scratched his head and burst into laughter, and then sobered as his mind raced frantically over several choices of operation. "Hey! How 'bout Loco?"

"Mebby; later, mebby," answered Johnny. "We still got somethin' else to get, an' we oughta get a *big* one. What you think?"

"Yeah! An' I saw one yesterday—a whopper! Man, oh, man! Things will mebby pop to-night!"

"It won't be no place, mebby, for any flapped holsters, or bunglin' draws," replied Johnny, chuckling.

"No! They shore want to be wide open an' plumb loose!" said Matt, by a distinct effort of will keeping his face straight. "Th' pore durn fools: growed men actin' like a lot of babies! You ever take any stock in that kinda stuff?"

"None whatever: but I've shore knowed plenty that did," chuckled Johnny. "Take th' number thirteen, now—but, shucks: what's th' use?"

"We'll mebby find out th' use," replied Matt, heading for the Palmer House with his companion close beside him.

Spike looked up, and the infection of their grins brought one to his own face.

"What's so funny?" he inquired hopefully.

"You," said Matt, letting his gaze drift slowly around the room.

"Thanks," grunted Spike.

Bill and Panhandle sat at their own table, minding their own business. They were perfunctorily playing California Jack. Wyatt and Dave were not in sight.

"Loosen up," said Spike. "What's so funny?"

"You," repeated Matt, laughing softly.

"Me, huh?" asked the bartender, holding the bar cloth aloft in momentary indecision. He glanced at the card players and then at the newcomers. "Why don't you four fellers get sociable?" he demanded, his gaze again shifting to the players. "There's two fellers over there that can win th' buttons off yore shirts, an' they're right good fellers, too." He raised his voice. "Hey, Bill: what you playin'?"

"Californy Jack, if it's any of yore business," replied Bill, smiling. "Me an' Panhandle can lick any two fellers on earth at this game."

The two friends looked at the card players, exchanged glances, and moved slowly toward the table.

"Cinch up, you fellers," said Johnny; "an' cinch tight!"

"We mostly ride her bare-back," retorted Bill. "We won't need no saddle to-day, it's that easy."

Panhandle smeared the cards in the center of the table.

"Play partners?" he asked.

Johnny's eyes flicked.

"Yeah: me an' you ag'in th' other two," he suggested.

Spike was surprised into a guffaw of laughter at this canny splitting up of partners.

"Durn if that ain't what I call usin' yore head!" he cried approvingly. "Th' winnin' combination now bein' busted, I'll lay even money either way."

"Two bits a corner," said Bill, ignoring the delighted bartender. "How you boys like this here town?"

"I said I'd lay two bits on either pair bein' winners," repeated Spike, loudly.

"All right; let yore right hand bet ag'in yore left," retorted Matt, thumbing his nose at the counter man.

"Why, this town ain't so bad," said Johnny, replying to Bill's question. "I'm gettin' so I kinda like it."

"Dad-blamed fool!" muttered Spike. He had been moving restlessly, and now he tossed the bar cloth on the rear shelf and looked at the four card players. "I'm goin' out for four, five minutes: take charge of things, will you, Bill?"

"Here's where our liquor don't cost us nothin'," said Matt, chuckling. "I'll take four whiskies on th' house, Bill."

Bill laughed and reached for the cards.

"Who's dealin'?" he asked.

Spike hurried out through the back door, and he no sooner was through it before Johnny leaned swiftly across the table and spoke softly to Bill and Panhandle. They listened closely to what he had to say, smiled until the safety of their ears was threatened, and agreed that his contemplated play might be a good one.

"You ain't never goin' to grow up, are you, Kid?" asked Bill, happily. He studied the keen, eager face and chuckled.

Panhandle smiled and let his hand touch Johnny's arm for an instant.

"Don't you grow up till you have to, Kid," he said. "Yore play may fizzle out, or it may start things poppin'. Go through with it, anyhow. Th' rest of us will be all ready to handle whatever trouble busts loose."

"Not meanin' that yo're goin' to hog it?" asked Matt suspiciously.

"Meanin' only that th' rest of us will handle any trouble that gets too big for you an' Johnny to take care of," hastily said Bill.

"You want to remember that there'll be twenty to thirty men in this room," said Panhandle, his eyes on the rear door. "Ssh! Here he comes!"

Spike bustled in through the door, looking comfortable even if his face was streaming with perspiration.

"Man, but it's hot out there," he growled, mopping vigorously.

"Ain't no place on earth no hotter," replied Panhandle, thoughtlessly, his mind on the game.

Dave and Wyatt wandered into the room, shied their hats through the air toward their own table, and slowly followed them. The hours dragged slowly past and finally the game broke up, the players pushing back from the table. Johnny stood up, stretched, and turned to his particular friend.

"Goin' to take a ride, Matt," he said. "You comin'?"

Matt caught the negative inflection in the voice and shook his head.

"I'm too cussed lazy," he said.

"I'd rather have company," Johnny persisted, pausing on his way to the door.

Dave Saunders caught the facial expression, read it rightly, and stretched prodigiously.

"Ain't such a bad idear, after all," he said, yawning. "Where you goin'?"

"I don't know: any place," answered Johnny, reluctantly. He did not seem to be overly pleased by the idea of riding with Dave.

"All right," sighed Dave, slowly rising. He followed Johnny out into the street, and a few minutes later they rode past the door, bound south.

Johnny was riding erratically, and Dave raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

"Why th' zig-zaggin'?"

"Lookin' for somethin', Dave. Ah, there's one!"

"Yeah?" asked Dave, looking around searchingly. "One what?"

"That red one, over there: I don't want to point."

Dave scrutinized the object and then turned a solemn and curious face to his companion.

"Shore; but what good is it?" he asked.

"I'll tell you that as we go along," answered Johnny, kneeing his horse.

"Why don't you take it, if you want it so bad?"

"Not now. I just want to locate it. I'll get it after dark."

Dave scratched his head and wondered. He glanced out of the corner of his eyes at his companion.

"Well, I reckon mebby you know what it's all about," he said, pushing up to the side of his friend. "You old Bar-20 fellers allus had that reputation, anyhow: but I'm durned if I can see what yo're drivin' at."

Johnny explained the matter as the horses moved slowly along the desert trail, and Dave's expression slowly changed from doubt to grudging agreement. He was frankly grinning when Johnny finished.

"Well," he said, with a pleasant drawl, "we ain't been none troubled by monotonousness so far; but if we was, I reckon mebby this idear of yourn would bust it up." He thought for a moment. "Huh! If it don't work there's no harm done: a joke is a joke; an' if it does, there'll mebby be excitement enough for 'most anybody." He finished by chuckling softly.

"Bill an' Panhandle know all about it," said Johnny. "You tell Wyatt what's up. When she busts we all want to be waitin' an' ready."

“I’m admittin’ that without no kind of reservations,” said Dave.

XIV

TOBACCO SMOKE swirled and eddied with the movements of the crowd among the tables and along the bar. In this corner, a poker game; in that, another; along the side wall a budding professional gambler was making use of his spare time by dealing faro-bank to numerous optimistic gentlemen; along the front wall, a three-card-monte game was running full blast, and was by far the favorite game of chance. The room was full of sound: loud talking, low talking; laughter, chuckles, growls and curses; a snatch of song; four inharmonious voices repeating the chorus of "Roll Along, Little Dogies." The sudden and startling crash of glass, and all eyes turned for a moment toward this alien note: but it was only Spike's precious wide-mouthed bottle, his personal humidor, knocked from its shelf by the owner's careless elbow. Spike's language for the moment dominated all other sounds and in turn was dominated by a gale of laughter at his discomfiture.

It still must have lacked an hour before midnight when a furtive countenance showed itself grudgingly and fearfully against one side of the rear door frame, shrinking from the sight of the many men in the room. Patiently its owner stood there, just outside the door.

The bartender filled a glass with liquor, holding both bottle and glass beneath the counter. He wiped the bar again, tossed the cloth on to the back bar, cupped the glass in his generous hand and sauntered toward the door. Looking out and up at the sky, he slyly reached a hand out into the night, and after a moment brought it back again. Slipping the empty glass into a pocket, he covered the bulge of the cloth by an arm, and wandered back to his place of duty, where he almost stepped on a cigar which had spilled from the broken humidor and rolled partly underneath the counter; but he did not see the cigar. Sliding the glass from his pocket to the shelf under the bar, he glanced up innocently and saw a man heading toward him, threading his way deviously among the chairs and tables. It was Johnny.

"Sleepy," somewhat guiltily acknowledged the young man. His grin was apologetic. "I reckon it was that ride I took."

"Mebby," grunted Spike, his mind on the unfortunate human just outside the rear door. "Mebby," he repeated, giving more attention to what went on about him.

"Was that Loco?" asked Johnny in a low voice as he indicated the back door by a barely perceptible movement of his head.

"Uh-huh," grunted Spike uncomfortably. "I told him to stay out of here nights."

Johnny nodded understandingly.

"Good idear, although mebby it ain't so necessary now. Gimme a rye whisky an' I'll turn in." He swung around and glanced over the room. "Seems like there's a bigger crowd here than there was last night."

"Yeah; all th' boys are in town now. Good thing, too: money was gittin' tight ag'in."

"All here, huh?"

"Well, all but a couple; an' why they ain't back, I dunno. They left a couple of days before you came in."

Dave Saunders, catching the words during a brief let-up in the general noise, flashed a look at his friend, Wyatt, and thought that they might be able to explain the continued absence of those two missing men.

"Did anybody get hurt, *this* time?" asked Johnny carelessly.

Spike looked him squarely in the eye.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Nothin'."

"Nothin' is th' best thing to mean, at a time like this," warned Spike. He cogitated for a moment. "Some of these fellers don't know nothin' about you, an' there are times when they get right touchy."

"Uh-huh," grunted Johnny. He raised the glass, looked at the scant drink, and downed it quickly. As he put the glass down on the bar he sensed a quick movement at the rear door and glanced around just in time to see Loco dash across the few intervening feet of floor and disappear behind the counter. Before the unfortunate old man could grasp the cigar and get away, Spike grabbed him by the collar and shoved him down behind the counter.

"He made it by good luck," whispered Johnny. "Better keep him where he is. Luck like that don't repeat itself twice runnin'."

Spike's reply was unprintable, but he kneed the hidden man farther under the bar and nodded his wholehearted agreement. He clumsily dropped the bar cloth and bent down to retrieve it, and in that brief moment his whispered warning was stern enough to be heeded. Standing erect again, he whipped the cloth through the air to free it from sand and dirt, and revealed a countenance placid and free from guile. Since breaking the humidor he had been expecting hard luck, and it was now beginning to operate.

"Yo're a good one, Spike," chuckled Johnny. "Good-night an' good luck."

Spike replied pleasantly and watched the departing customer, and then looked toward the first poker table in answer to his name, nodded at the upheld fingers, and reached for bottles and glasses.

"Three Jacks," said Matt, laying down his hand. He scooped in the chips, looked up swiftly, grinned at Spike, and took the glass offered him. "They can bust Johnny, Spike; but they can't bust *me*," he exulted. "Where'd he go, anyhow?" he asked, his gaze flitting around the room.

"To bed," answered Spike, and he laughed knowingly. "Then *that's* why he got sleepy!"

He waited until the last man had used the bottle, saw that all were served, swept the money into a big hand, and then loitered to watch the next deal, his anxious thoughts on the old prospector lying hidden behind the bar. Blast that cigar!

At a sound he turned and glanced toward the faro players and saw Dave's angry gesture. Dave turned from the game with a snort of disgust and sought an empty chair halfway along the front wall. Spike did not realize it, and there was no reason why he should realize it, but Dave had placed himself in a dangerous but strategic position: the whole room lay before him, with the front door at his left.

A man moved away from the three-card spread, tobacco smoke swirling behind him. He looked at the bar, found it deserted, and glanced around in search of its tender. Pushing past the tables, Wyatt stopped at Spike's side and nudged him.

"Got another glass with you?" he asked.

"No," answered Spike, turning abruptly. "Come along to th' bar."

"Reckon they musta put some salt on Dave's tail," chuckled Wyatt, leaning comfortably against the counter. He hooked a high heel over the rail, rested an elbow on the edge of the counter, and shook his head dolefully. "If Dave's luck don't change right soon, an' he keeps on playin' cards, he shore will have to find himself some kinda job. I'm guessin' he's near busted, right now. Dave allus was a fool where faro is concerned."

"Evenest game there is," said Spike. "Th' odds are less ag'in you in faro-bank than in any other gamblin' game."

"Yeah, so I've heard," grunted Wyatt. "Personally, I like three-card better. Well, here's how!"

"How," growled Spike, stepping on a piece of broken bottle. He swore gently and kicked it under the counter.

Wyatt turned his head and most of his body, looking over the room, and his eyes rested on the poker game in the far rear corner. The game was a quiet, orderly affair and the interest of the players did not stray from it—did not dare to stray.

"That Panhandle seems to make out right well," Wyatt observed, sizing up the chips stacked in front of that favored son of Chance. "You reckon him an' his pardner are square gamblers?"

"Ain't seen nothin' to make me think nothin' else," replied Spike, shortly.

Wyatt turned and beckoned to his pessimistic friend against the front wall. "Hey, Dave! Come on over an' lemme buy you a drink!"

Dave dropped his chair forward and as the two front legs struck the floor he was out of it and on his way. He stopped at the bar, hooked a high heel over the rail, and smiled wryly.

"This bein' one of them rare occasions when you loosen up," he said, "I shore will take that drink. It may be a year before it happens ag'in. Well, here's how!"

The three men talked for a moment or two and then Dave wandered off, finally reaching his still vacant chair. He dropped into it and glanced down the room. Bill and Panhandle were still playing poker, but he noticed that both had pushed back a little from the table. Matt's game, also, was still going on; but Matt, too, had pushed a little away from the table's edge. Wyatt moved around the room, finally leaning against the side wall, where he faced the bar.

Some cheerful soul had raised his lone voice in song, to be joined quickly by other cheerful souls; and the words, starting tentatively, gained power as the singers gained confidence. It was not long before most of the men in the room were singing.

"*Oh, a ten-dollar hoss an' a forty-dollar saddle,*
An' I'm goin' to punchin' Texas cattle.

Coma ti yi youpy, youpy ya, youpy ya,
Coma ti yi youpy ya, youpy ya.

I woke up one mornin' on th' old Chisholm Trail,
Rope in my hand an' a cow by th' tail.

Coma ti yi youpy, youpy ya, youpy ya,
Coma ti yi youpy ya; youpy ya.

Old Ben Bolt was a blame' good boss,
But he'd go to see th' girls on a sore-backed hoss.

Coma ti yi youpy, youpy ya, youpy ya,
Coma ti yi youpy ya, youpy ya."

The song stopped abruptly, the words freezing in the mouths of the singers as a most unearthly scream sounded in the night outside. Beginning at the bottom of the scale in throbbing, sobbing notes, the sound swept upward in pitch and intensity until it tortured eardrums with its piercing, stabbing notes.

The room was hushed, breathless, as if sudden paralysis had seized its inmates. Faces registered almost every kind of emotion, but some of them were strangely pale and contorted. Loco, his head now above the bar, was transfixed by terror. Tom Walters, gripping the table edge with straining intensity, seemed frozen by fear. His eyeballs seemed to protrude and his tobacco-stained mouth was gaping. Some of his friends, halfway out of their chairs, remained in that posture, and one man's forearm was bent before his face as if to ward off a blow. There came the loud and unexpected crash of glass, and Spike looked down at the shattered bottle which had fallen from his nerveless fingers.

The falling bottle broke the spell and there was a sudden bustle of movement, checked almost instantly by another rising, torturing shriek which sounded much farther off. It seemed to come from the direction of the little, deserted adobe shack in the bottoms, and this indication of direction seemed to have a sinister implication, for it dropped Tom Walters back into his chair, where he fairly cringed with fear.

After a short pause the motion began again. Tables were overturned and chairs thrown out of the way of the rising, rushing crowd bound for the doors. At the front door the first man collided with Johnny Nelson, who fought and pushed and clawed his way against the stream of outpouring humanity, shouting curses and meaningless words. He managed to force his way through the doorway and gain the room, and the exit, now being free from incoming opposition, let the crowd pour out at a better speed.

Johnny sidled toward the boss, fearfully watching doors and windows, as nervous as a frightened cat.

"Don't blame 'em none!" he muttered. He glanced hopefully at Walters. "What *was* it? *What* was it, Tom?"

Walters gulped and tried to get hold of himself. He was shaking his head automatically and mumbling that he did not know. And then he stiffened, suddenly remembering a trick of Loco's.

"It was that durn Loco!" he cried. "It was him a-yellin'——" and the words died in his throat as he realized that he was at that moment staring directly at the old prospector and that he had been staring at him since the first shriek rang out.

"Not Loco!" snapped Spike, pugnaciously. "Loco's been right here behind th' bar since before—since before we heard anythin'."

"Yes," admitted Walters. "Yes, yes."

"Sounded like a woman's shriek," said Johnny, still watching the doors and windows. "It was a woman's shriek, or I never heard one; but," he said, pausing thoughtfully—"but there ain't no woman out here! There ain't a woman in this part of th' country! I reckon there was never any woman out here."

"Yo're dead wrong, Johnny!" snapped Spike, clapping a quick hand over Loco's opening mouth. "There *was* one, by Gawd! There *was*!"

"Light more lamps!" shouted Walters, glaring from Spike to Loco, and back again. "Shut yore —— —— mouth an' light more lamps!"

"Ain't no more to light," rejoined Spike. "An' as for my mouth, I'll shut it when I please!"

"There was a woman here, in town?" incredulously asked Johnny, speaking to Spike, but keeping his eyes on the boss of Hell's Center. "Then mebby she's come back ag'in. Well, that shore explains it. But why did she shriek, an' where is she?"

"Do th' dead come back?" asked Spike spitefully, and again closing Loco's mouth.

"I don't know; some folks say they do," answered Johnny; "but it's only when they've been murdered, or somethin' like that."

Walters arose, his face livid, his eyes on the window nearest him.

"There ain't no woman within close to a hundred miles of here," said Spike, venomously, his eyes on the back of the boss. He kicked some broken glass under the bar. "It shore sounded, th' last time, like it came from that old 'dobe in th' bottoms," he said, relishing the words, poisonous as they were.

Walters wheeled and replied in a burst of profanity. He saw his few remaining friends looking at him accusingly, and he blustered to face them down. He sensed that his affairs were at a crisis, but before he could find adequate words to help him, there came the scrape of a chair from the side wall, where Matt Skinner sat suddenly upright.

"Th' boys will find out all about it," said Matt, calmly. "They're combin' th' sage, right now, an' combin' it close. I never did believe in ghosts; *but*," he smiled shamefacedly, "I allus was a-scared of 'em. If that was a ghost it shore was a woman's. There ain't no two ways about that. A woman: a *murdered* woman."

"Ghosts!" sneered Walters, but his voice most woefully lacked conviction. "Ghosts! You wait till daylight an' we'll see about th' ghosts! Do ghosts make tracks? *Do they?*"

"No, they don't," answered Matt, complacently, thinking of the gang milling around over the sands. "Do you reckon you'll find tracks?"

"Tracks or no tracks," said Johnny, insistently, "I'm tellin' you that was a woman's voice!" He interrupted Spike's quick protest, and replied to it. "Oh, I know there ain't no woman—no *live* woman—nowhere near here; but that was a woman's shriek, just th' same! A woman sufferin' th' tortures of th' damned!"

"Yo're a —— —— fool!" shouted Walters at the top of his voice. He had swung around to face this insistent tormentor. He leaned forward, balanced on the balls of his feet, both arms hanging down at his sides, their elbows crooked, his fingers spread apart. "Yo're a —— —— fool!" he repeated.

"An' *that* makes you a liar!" snapped Johnny, his hands resting on his lean hips just above the handles showing in the worn and open-topped holsters.

Walters' hands moved, but his friends threw themselves on him, pinning his straining arms, and succeeded in wrestling him back into a chair, where they forcibly held him.

"No man can call me a liar an' make it stick!" he shouted, struggling viciously, but in vain. "Let loose my arms! Let me loose, I tell you!"

"I've just called you a liar, an' I'm shore big enough to make it stick," retorted Johnny. "Looks to me like you got a durn good reason to be scared of a woman's ghost! I never saw a white man turn yaller as quick as you did. Yore eyes were fair poppin' outa yore head. Yo're shakin' now so you couldn't hit a barn with a shotgun, let alone a Colt."

He looked at the men holding the furious boss of Hell's Center, and nodded.

"Hold him tight, or he'll make me blow him loose," he said. "He's half-scared to death, even now, an' I don't want to take no advantage of him. Daylight will be here in a few hours, an' if his yaller ain't settled down ag'in, I'll give it time; if it has settled, then I'll give him all th' chance he wants to see if I can make that name stick."

He glanced around, sneering contemptuously.

"An' who did he try to blame it on?" he asked with a sneer. "On *me*? *You* boys? *Matt*, there? Naw: he picked out *Loco*! Picked out a man that ain't only crazy, but ain't got a gun! Huh! He's as yaller as mustard!"

Men were beginning to stream in again, talking loudly until they sensed that trouble was brewing in the room, whereupon they grew quiet; but the quarrel died out with their entry, and soon the room was booming with talk. It was all foolishness, they said, to search in the darkness; and it was very doubtful if some of them had searched very far or hard.

It now appeared that Bill and Panhandle, Dave and Wyatt, and Matt, too, firmly believed in ghosts, and more particularly women ghosts; Johnny persistently held to his theory, altered slightly, that it had been the shriek of a living woman; and instantly drew the verbal fire of every man in the room. In the enthusiasm of the assault upon him, the ghost theory was greatly strengthened.

"Hear th' durn fools!" sneered Walters, his slumbering rage fanned anew by the trend of the arguments.

"Hear th' yaller liar!" retorted Johnny, and again Walters' friends held him down. "Yaller from th' soles of his feet to th' top of his head! He near cried like a baby when that second shriek rang out!"

Walters was forced to listen to the advice of his friends because he could not get away from them, and gradually their arguments and good offices bore down his opposition. As passion left him, a clearer thinking mind began to function. Nature often compensates ignorance by giving cunning.

"Stranger," he began, speaking calmly and unemotionally, "my friends all tell me that I had no business to call you a durn fool, which I now admit freely. As to bein' yaller, if you want to shoot it out, come daylight, I'll be with you, an' show you a different color. There are some things I might be scared of: but they ain't nothin' that is flesh an' blood, an' least of all, anythin' that packs a gun. You can call th' turn of th' card."

Johnny was in an unenviable position, forced into it by this amende honorable. He had determined to kill Walters at daylight; but to persist in this course now would be to put him squarely in the wrong and arouse the unnecessary hostility of every man in the town except his own friends. He looked about the room. Bill's gently nodding head counseled acceptance of the apology; Panhandle was making the same sign. Johnny's gaze moved on, reading face after face, and for a moment rested on Dave.

"Fair enough," said Dave loudly. "Takes a man to talk like that."

"Right," said Wyatt, and the murmur of approval from the majority of the crowd gave him a cue which he scarcely could ignore. He looked back at the boss, and slowly nodded his head.

"It's a kinda delicate proposition," said Johnny. "It kinda makes it a question of a feller's courage—but I'm statin' plain that anybody that has anythin' to say about mine can reach for his gun at th' same time: he'll need to.

"Walters, I called you a liar only because you called me a durn fool," he continued calmly. "If you say I ain't no durn fool, as you just have done, then I say that you ain't no liar. As for bein' yaller," he chuckled gently, "I reckon you wasn't no more scared than I was. I was so scared that I pushed back about two dozen husky fellers to git through that door to where there was some light; an' I got in, too, in spite of 'em all!"

He laughed.

"If yo're buryin' th' hatchet, I'll shore help you tromple th' earth down on top of it. An' mebby me an' you can prove, to anybody that needs proof, that neither one of us are scared of anythin' that wears pants an' drinks liquor. How 'bout it?"

"Set 'em out for all hands, Spike; an' make mine rye," said the cunning boss, standing up. He looked around the room and then back at Johnny.

"I'd shore like to know what made that noise," he said, slowly; "an' when daylight gits here, I'm shore goin' to try to find out."

"We'll both try it," replied Johnny. "If it was a ghost, all right; but if it wasn't, then heaven help it."

He slowly followed the crowd to the bar and joined Walters at the far end.

"I never did believe in ghosts; but . . ." He sighed, and raised his glass amicably in salute to the enemy of only a few minutes before.

XV

THE CROWD gradually settled back into the various occupations which had intrigued it before the ghostly interruption, but it was plain to be seen that all ears were cocked and listening for a repetition of the uncanny shrieks.

Johnny moved about the room and made his way to the front door. He stood in it for a few moments and then stepped out into the night. Loco already had left the building, having watched his chance and slipped out while the quarrel flared.

Johnny moved along the street, turned down the far side of the next building, swiftly removed his boots, and then, running lightly, dashed for a clump of sage not far away. He gained it, reached into it, picked something up, and slipped back to the building. Here he knelt, reached under the structure, and pushed something as far back under the floor as he could. This part of the building was a frame addition; had it been of adobe he could not have made use of it. Putting on his boots, he sauntered back to the street, along it, and reëntered the Palmer House.

A full minute after Johnny had passed from sight into the barroom, a figure detached itself from a third building, a building which stood on the other side of the street and faced the one in which Johnny had been interested. This figure, slight and furtive, slipped across the street, along the side of the second building, and crawled out of sight under it. Emerging a moment later, Loco held something in his hand; something rather bulky.

Johnny, on reëntering the Palmer House, sauntered over to watch the poker game in the far rear corner, disappointed that his night's activities had not developed the showdown he had hoped for. He knew the real value of his truce with the boss of Hell's Center; he knew that it was more dangerous for him than an open fight.

Walters pulled out his watch, glanced at it, and slid it back into the pocket.

"Another hour to daylight," he growled. "*Then* we'll see what we'll see!"

"Yeah, reckon so," grunted a voice.

Walters let his gaze rest on Johnny and gave free rein to his suspicions: Johnny was the only man who had not been in the barroom when those shrieks had sounded. Walters' jaw set grimly and his face became hard for

an instant; and he suddenly reddened with anger at the thought that the fear which had so strongly gripped him and made him so ridiculous had been caused by human trickery.

"Well," said a voice, humorously, "whatever it was, I'd a blame' sight rather see it in daylight than at night!"

"Yo're right; dead right!" called out a friend. "I'd even go so far as to say that I'd rather hear it at night than see it at day——"

Again the room hushed, again everything was forgotten but the sound which filled the air. Softened a little by distance, it nevertheless held all its horrible, torturing qualities. Rising and falling, it ended in a low, throbbing sob. Again it came, this time dying out on its highest note, a quavering, stiletto of sound. Then came silence, doubly silent.

Tom Walters, the foundations kicked out from under his mental structure, was low down in his chair, shrinking, cringing, pale of face and speechless. Johnny was present this time: not a man was missing!

Somebody sighed loudly. A chair scraped as a man leaped suddenly to his feet.

"I'm not gonna wait for daylight to come!" he shouted, looking about wildly. "I'm gettin' out of this fool country, an' I'm gettin' *now*!" A most reassuring thought was in his mind: the sound had come from the direction of the old adobe shack on the bottoms, where by all rights it should come from; and the shortest trail out of town led directly away from that accursed building.

"Don't you do it!" yelled a friend in panicky warning. "Not at night! Yore hoss can travel fast, but *that* thing can catch it in one jump! Wait till *day*light, an' *I*'ll go with you!"

"I ain't waitin' for nothin' or nobody!" replied the first speaker.

"Shut up! Shut yore face!" snapped Walters, standing up now, a gun in his hand. "I'll shoot th' first rat that tries to leave *this* ship! Set down! Set down, both of you!"

His gaze, after a moment's scrutiny of the two would-be deserters, moved slowly around the room and came to rest on Johnny, who only now was sinking back into his chair. He did not see Matt, for Matt was just out of the field of his vision; and Matt was twice as dangerous for that very reason: the open end of Matt's holster had moved upward in an arc under his coat and was lined up squarely on the chest of the boss of Hell's Center. At the poker table in the far rear corner of the room, Bill was hunched forward over the table's edge, as if to hear and see better; but his elbows were resting on

his knees, both knees and elbows out of sight, of course. Under that big table two heavy guns were leveled on Tom Walters. Panhandle was watching Walters' closest friends, while Dave and Wyatt alertly kept cases on the rest of the room.

The boss spoke, but as the first words came forth he quickly had to change them, for it had just come to his mind that Johnny had been in the room before, during, and after the last shrieks.

"Take it easy, Johnny; we'll find out th' answer to all this deviltry at th' first crack of daylight."

Johnny looked up at him, releasing a gusty breath. Puzzlement still showed in his face. He knew what had made the sounds, but . . .

"Yeah, we will," he said, slowly. "Where—which way do you reckon—it —came from?"

"That old 'dobe hut in th' bottoms," answered a nervous voice quickly.

"From th' old 'dobe in th' bottoms," muttered Walters. He struggled with himself for a moment, and then threw his head back defiantly.

"All right, then!" he said tensely. "Come daylight, we all go to th' old 'dobe hut in th' bottoms: we *all* go!"

Opalescence transformed the eastern sky, objects emerged from the graying plain. Spike walked slowly from behind the bar and put out the first lamp. He yawned, stretched out one arm and then the other, and raised both toward the hanging lamp in the center of the room. One by one the kerosene wicks grew black, and stank. The eastern sky was now bright. Outside horses pawed restlessly, and there came the low and musical clinking of harness chains.

Tom Walters stood up with sudden energy. He looked tired, drawn, like a man whose physical fatigue was less than his mental, and both enough. He looked around the room, meeting questioning eyes; and as usual, his gaze sought out and rested on Johnny.

"Aw, shucks!" yawned someone from a corner. "Let's eat, first."

Walters considered the remark without looking at the speaker. He considered it with divided attention. The two thoughts in his mind untangled, and he pushed aside the more important for the more pleasant.

"All right," he growled in sudden decision. "Somebody go over an' prod th' cook; tell him to rustle chuck regardless." He looked again at Johnny. "After we feed I'm goin' to prospect that 'dobe hut over in th' bottoms. You want to come along with me?"

The question was a challenge, and it stirred Johnny as it had been intended to stir him.

"Reckon so," he answered with seeming reluctance, striving to hide his eagerness.

"It's daylight, *now*!" said Walters unpleasantly.

The implication stung the young man into bravado, and he followed willingly the trail of the other man's choosing.

"*I* don't care whether it's daylight or not!" he retorted. "I'll go any place *you* will."

"Well, I'm glad to hear you *say* it, anyhow," rejoined Walters. He smiled thinly and looked around the room again. "You boys scatter out an' search th' whole plain an' bottoms," he ordered, his words embracing every man in the room except Spike, Johnny, and himself. "Me an' Johnny will take care of th' hut."

"An' me," said Matt eagerly. "I'd like to see it."

"Huh!" sneered Walters, again turning to Johnny. "*Yore* friend wants to go along."

Johnny flushed and turned an indignant face to Matt.

"You can see it after we get back," he said sharply, determined that there be no second fizzle to his plan. "Me an' Tom have kinda got a little bet about which one of us goes in that hut first."

Walters' eyes glinted and his lids drew closer together. "Yes," he said, "we have. After what was said last night, we both have kinda got to show that our guts are where they oughta be. That makes it a two-man affair."

XVI

DUST FILLED the little street as horseman after horseman mounted, whirled, and rode off to begin the search for they knew not what.

"Let's git in th' saddle, an' be ready to start," said the boss, stepping toward his horse. He mounted with his face toward his companion, a polite compliment which Johnny copied carefully.

"Might as well start now," said Walters, and side by side they swung around the corner of the Palmer House and rode slowly forward in the direction of the adobe hut.

"Take it easy," said Walters, keeping his horse at a walk, his eyes on three distant horsemen on the far side of the little creek. "We'll give th' boys time to start th' circle an' swing in. They'll center on th' shack."

"Uh-huh," grunted Johnny, riding knee to knee with his companion.

They threaded their way through the sage and followed down the gentle slope of the basin. Steadily the hut drew nearer, but they were so much closer to it than the others that they would arrive minutes ahead of the nearest rider.

"You don't believe in ghosts, huh?" suddenly asked Walters, with the trace of a sneer in his voice.

"No; not in daylight, anyhow; an' not enough to make a durn fool of myself," answered Johnny. "I might, though, if that hut meant anythin' special to me."

"Yer? An' what does that mean?" asked the boss of Hell's Center. His voice had a hard ring.

"It meant somethin' to Big Henry."

"An' what was that?"

"Dunno; but it shore bothered him."

"Huh! Lots of things bothered Big Henry," replied Walters with a snort of disgust. "They ain't botherin' him now."

"No; reckon not."

The hut was near now; so near that they could see the sun cracks in the adobe. Whoever had built it had been short of hardware, and made use of leather straps for hinges. They had long since dried out and parted, and the

packing-case door had fallen inward. The two men pulled up and stopped a scant dozen feet from the opening.

"Well, here we are," growled Walters, trying to keep the tenseness out of his voice.

"Yeah," replied Johnny, his horse sidling about until it was possible to dismount with Walters in plain view.

They swung down simultaneously, facing each other; and each stepped quickly away from his mount. For a moment they exchanged level looks, and then Walters gently waved his left hand.

"After you," he said politely.

"What for?" asked Johnny, curiously. "I got no interest in no ghosts."

"No?"

"No."

Walters' eyelids dropped a little and a faint smile wreathed his face.

"But it's *day*light *now*," he said, a sneer edging his words.

"I reckon mebby that's why you've come so close to it," retorted Johnny. He jerked his head sideways toward the open door. "Go ahead in: you ain't scared, are you?"

Three riders were coming up from the south, and three more from the west. Both groups were moving at a walk, and, strange to say, were watching each other more than they were the hut. The group that Johnny saw was composed of friends of his companion; the group in Walters' arc of vision was made up of Bill, Panhandle, and Matt. Neither Walters nor Johnny dared to take his eyes from the man in front of him, and so neither saw the other group.

"Stubborn, ain't you?" asked Walters, so watchful and intent that his lips barely moved; and this, in itself, was sufficient warning, had it been needed, to the other man.

"No; just kinda set," replied Johnny. "If yo're goin' to have a look around in there before company gets here, you better get started."

"No!" snapped Walters, angrily. "Get in there, an' get in there quick!"

"Still scared, huh? It's yore ghost, not mine," retorted Johnny, and then he laughed. "Just to show you that I don't believe in ghosts, I'll go in first; an' I'll prove it to you by backin' in. Takes guts to back in ag'in ghosts, Walters!" Again he laughed. "Right now I'm figgerin' that th' only danger there is for me is in front, an' not behind."

Step by step he moved backwards, feeling his way. To trip or to stumble now might be fatal. He had almost covered the distance when he heard a noise in the hut, and as his suspicious mind thought of a man planted inside to shoot him down, his spur caught on a root and he lost his balance.

Never in all his life had he thought quicker than he was thinking now. To waste a split second of time in trying to regain his balance would mean death; so he jerked out both guns and turned them loose in a cross fire. His first shot was even with Walters' third.

The instant Johnny's spur had caught on the root Walters' two hands were in action, the left fanning the hammer of the gun held by the right, and fanning in a very blur of speed.

Johnny struck the earth wreathed in swirling clouds of his own powder smoke, rolled over and up with his legs gathered under him, and his spring carried him nearly a dozen feet. Turning while in the air, he struck the earth again with his heels, facing the open door and covering it with both guns. With the first crash of his left-hand gun he had mentally eliminated Walters as a danger, but he had let a second shot go to make doubly certain. Walters, as a matter of fact, was not only mentally eliminated, but physically, too; his first three shots had come out of his gun as close together as shots could come; the fourth clipped the edge of the doorway, and the fifth went almost straight up in the air, for the shooter was dead when his relaxed thumb had let the hammer fall.

Then came silence, a silence so abrupt as to give the impression of a jerk. Walters lay half in and half out of a little clump of sage, two holes through the upper left-hand pocket of his already soaked vest. Fancy shooting when the nerves are taut, and split seconds precious, seldom makes the scores that it does in target play.

Johnny, his back to Walters and the approaching horsemen from the south, caught a glimpse of the other riders, and forthwith gave his entire attention to the open door of the hut. The smoke had thinned out now, and let him see clearly. He heard the pounding of hoofs behind him and to one side of him; and again, as he had so often done before, he put his unqualified trust in Hopalong.

"Come out of there!" he snapped, balanced on the balls of his spread feet. "Come out with yore hands up, or I'm comin' in with mine spittin' lead!"

"Don't shoot no more!" wailed a thin and quavering voice. "Don't shoot no more! I'm a-comin' mister; I'm a-comin' fast as I can!"

The unseen speaker made good his words, but he came with music blaring, like the Highlanders of old. No bag-pipes swirled in Loco's hands, but the sounds were as piercing. He stepped into and through the doorway, his face covered with blood from two lead-carved gashes on his forehead; one leg buckled slightly because of another lead-ripped wound; and under his left arm was hugged a huge tomato-can, while his right hand, gripping a chunk of resin, pulled strongly against a short but heavy cord.

Johnny had sense enough to keep from dropping his guns, but hardly more. He fumbled with them around the tops of their sheaths, trying to find the openings, and then let them drop into place. He sat down on the sandy earth and laughed himself weak and silly. Loco wheeled, faced about, and started for town, his instrument shrieking and wailing.

The two squads of horsemen drew steadily nearer, riding in parallel lines. They had seen the swift tragedy from a point near enough to make explanations needless, yet the right-hand squad was primed to ask questions.

The two groups passed Walters' body with barely a glance, being too much occupied with possible troubles with the living to pay much attention to the dead. The leaders of each short line drew rein and the two squads stopped. Loco was still parading through the sage, bound for town, limping slowly along, his tomato-can instrument of torture making the day hideous. He had lost his hat, and his long hair streamed in the wind.

Johnny arose by an effort and faced about. His glance swept swiftly past his friends and rested on the other three horsemen. The laughter had gone from him, and now he was appraising and cool.

Powers, the leader of the unfriendly three, and the poker player who habitually doubted the honesty of his fellow players, was the first to speak. "Reckon we'll pick him up an' take him on to town," he said, tentatively.

"Shore," said Johnny. "Be sure to tell it just like you saw it."

"Shore. Bosses certainly do come an' go in this man's town," said Powers, his admiring gaze resting on the young man who could shoot so admirably when turning, upside down in the air.

"Shore do," admitted Johnny.

"Th' bosses have been comin' an' goin' fast since you strangers came to town," said the second man in Powers' group.

"Seems so," said Panhandle, coldly.

"Sorta coincidence, like," said the third man.

"That's shore th' healthiest way of lookin' at it," said Matt, smiling.

"You fellers act kinda like you was well knowed to each other," remarked Powers, thoughtfully.

"Folks get acquainted quick in a small town like this," said Bill, pleasantly. "I feel like I've knowed you all my life."

"Yeah," said Powers a little uneasily. He looked again at Johnny. "Walters didn't fool you much, huh, when he smoked th' pipe of peace with you last night?"

"Not nothin' to mention," answered Johnny.

"Wonder how come he picked out this place to run her off?" asked Powers, scratching his chin.

"Didn't have th' guts to work it out in an even break," answered Bill; "so he figgered there wouldn't be nobody around out here to see him commit a murder."

"Well, he didn't commit it," drawled Powers, slowly swinging out of the saddle. "Now we got to hold another election; but first, we'll take *him* in to town."

He winced as the gusty wind brought a more powerful and more horrible strain of Loco's instrument to his ears.

"That's awful! An' *that* was th' ghost! Well, well, well," he chuckled as he pictured the consternation the shrieks had caused in a room full of grown men. "What a bunch of durn fools we all was!" Looking around and down at the body in the sage bush, he shook his head, and chuckled again. "An' *you*, Tom, was th' biggest fool of all!"

XVII

THERE WERE two prominent members left out of the select circle of six which had formed the nucleus of the gang. One of these was George White, a tall, gangling, saturnine man with a cast in one eye, whose mustache apparently never had felt a scissors. When it got too long he chewed it shorter. It proclaimed him to be an inveterate chewer of tobacco.

The other remaining member was a Texan who went by the name of Paso Frank, a man of rather less than average stature. He was slender, wiry, quick in all of his actions. His legs were more than ordinarily bowed and, because of this, suggested the thought in more than one mind that he had been allowed to use a saddle for a cradle.

The sequence of the afternoon's events was laid out with some idea of propriety. First and foremost, as a necessary aid to inspiration, were the rounds of liquor drunk to the memory of the deceased. The deceased lay on two tables which had been pushed together. He was wrapped in his own dirty blankets, his face exposed at one end and his dusty boots at the other. Liquor flowed freely, most of it at the expense of the hopeful candidates for the vacant boss-ship.

The first argument of weight arose over the delicate question of boots; should the lamented deceased be buried with his boots on, or off? George White was of the opinion that the boots should be undisturbed; and, naturally enough, Paso Frank had to defend the opposite idea.

To Bill, sitting in the rear far corner of the barroom, the disposition of this question was interesting and important, for it bid fair to indicate the strength of the two candidates for the vacant office. He and his friend, lolling back in their chairs in nonchalant detachment, as behooved them in a matter in which they were outsiders, nevertheless gave careful attention to everything that went on in the big room; and were particularly attentive to the infrequent remarks concerning the "strangers" and the growing thought of their cohesiveness.

Dave and Wyatt were doing the same, while Matt sat by himself in the far front corner, listening to everything, and especially to anything which might threaten the safety of his absent companion. Johnny had quietly effaced himself and slipped away during one of the stampedes toward the bar. He was at that moment sitting on a box of canned tomatoes in the general store, giving the attentive proprietor a history of recent events.

"An' I say if you could 'a' got 'em off before he died, then it would 'a' been all right to plant him barefoot," said White argumentatively, and the murmur of the crowd indicated that the majority was with him. "I main-tain that it would desa—desa—insult Tom Walters to disturb him now. He was a friend of mine, an' no friend of mine is goin' to be insulted when he's dead."

"Good for you, George!"

"That's th' idear," bellowed a knee-buckling brave near the end of the bar. " 'Stoo late now."

"That so?" inquired a rival partisan. "You wouldn't know an idear if it kicked you in th' pants!"

"Why, you——"

"No quarrelin', boys," said Paso Frank, knowing himself to be on the minority side, but hoping to gain converts as the whisky worked. He turned to face his rival.

"Mebby you claim that Tom wasn't a friend of mine, too?" he said, his red face redder from the effects of the liquor in him. "*I* ain't goin' to have him insulted, neither! That's why I want him planted barefoot! Like a man should oughta be planted! Like Christians are planted, all over th' world!"

"He wore 'em when he lived, an' he had 'em on when he died!" retorted White aggressively. "An' he's bein' planted with 'em on!"

Paso Frank, waiting a moment for the noise to subside, replied to his rival's remark.

"Yes, he wore 'em when he lived, all right; but while he lived he took 'em off when he went to sleep—an' he's shore gone to sleep now, a sleep that'll never end. Seems to me that we oughta pay him th'——"

"I vote agin' th' barefoot idear," shouted an inebriate with a finishing hiccup.

"That's it! Vote on her! Put her to a vote!"

"Yeah, vote on her."

"Just a minute, boys," shouted White, raising a hand. "Just a minute! Votin' don't make a thing right! Votin' is only a—a——"

"Durn nuisance! Who cares how he's buried?"

" 'Spression of opinion," yelled another.

"Excuse for a fight," said a third, roaring with laughter.

"Vote on her! Vote on her!"

"Shore! Vote on her!"

"Come on: put her to a vote!"

"All in favor of votin' on her, raise their han's!" shouted a leather-lunged desperado near the front door, and he held up his own hand as an example. "Carried!" he announced without counting. "All in favor of plantin' him like he is, boots an' all, holler *aye*! Th' ayes have it. There you are, all done an' over with, settled permanent!"

"Line up!" yelled a companion. "We'll drink to his boots!"

"Shore; but ain't it about time for th' house to set out a round?"

"Which th' house does!" shouted Spike at the top of his voice in order to make himself heard over the affirmative chorus. "This is on th' house!" he yelled, still louder, if possible; and he was swamped under a rolling avalanche of cheers.

Bill arose and moved to the side of George White, resting a hand on the bandit's shoulder.

"Friend," he said, softly, "tell us what is right. Me an' Panhandle are strangers. We'd like to pay our respects to th' dead, an' join in th' funeral: what would th' boys think about it?"

"It's a fair question, stated fair," answered White, swaying back on his heels. "Th' boys would take it kindly of you. Them other two fellers, too; an' that Matt hombre. Dunno about that Johnny coyote: dunno a-tall. *Wait!*"

He swayed forward and stopped against Paso Frank, leaning on the smaller man while he whispered. After a moment he returned shaking his head.

"We've had shootin' enough for one day," he said, "an' th' boys are gettin' their skins full. Better keep *him* away!"

Bill walked toward the front door, returning along the wall, and on his way he passed the word to his friends. He rejoined Panhandle and dropped into his chair. Two men came in through the back door, shovels in their hands, and sweat and grime on their flushed faces.

"Purty hard diggin'," said the first shovel bearer.

"Shore is: we oughta find another buryin' ground, where th' soil is—*look there!*" he exclaimed as brightening vision revealed the line-up at the bar. "Somebody's buyin': come on!" The shovels clattered to the floor as their erstwhile wielders leaped forward.

George White stepped back from the bar and raised his voice above the general noise.

"Well, boys!" he shouted, and after waiting a moment, tried again. "Boys!"

The talking and laughter slowly died, and the candidate for leadership, swaying slightly, raised an arm and continued.

"Boys, we got to do th' last rites for pore Tom Walters," he said. "A couple of you ketch holt of his feet, an' a couple more git him by th' shoulders. If he buckles, a couple more can take care of that. Me an' Paso, bein' all that are left of th' original six members of this here band, will lead th' parade. Them with th' corpse, foller us; an' th' rest of you boys foller th' corpse. Are we all ready?"

"If you'd got his boots off before he died," said a disputatious drunk, "then I'd say, leave 'em off. There ain't no use of——"

"Aw, shut up, Murphy: that's all settled."

"Quit yore spoutin', Murphy, an' fall in here with me."

"But ain't I right?" demanded Murphy, teetering back on to his heels. "Ain't I?"

"Shore yo're right. Come over here with me."

"Right you are! If you'll admit it, now, all right!" Murphy looked around the room, saw Bill and Panhandle slowly rising from their chairs, and then looked at the other strangers and found that they, also, were moving toward the end of the line.

"You strangers git in th' tail of th' line," ordered Murphy, and staggered forward to personally place them. "Right in here, Bill; you next, Panhandle. Walters was a durn skunk, but I'll say no ill of th' dead. Th' rest of you fall in behind 'em. No laughin' or jokin', mind, till we get him planted dacent an' all covered over. All right, George: crack th' whip an' throw off the brakes: *let her go!*"

The procession filed out into the street in a somewhat ragged manner, having the tendency to thin out here and to bunch up there; but after the doorway was left behind most of the difficulties were past. It wound down the street, turned the slope along the blacksmith shop, and stopped on a little hillock back of the harness-maker's shop. Mounds and headboards marked it for what it was, and the shallow, new grave with its pile of freshly turned earth and gravel and sand marked the stopping place, both for the funeral cortège and for the dead.

"Shut yore mouths an' take off yore hats," George White said. "I'll say a few words before th' last dirt falls. You two, with th' shovels: scoop it in as

soon as his body hits bottom, an' scoop fast. All right, boys: lower away, an' lower gentle."

"If you'd took his boots off before he died—" said Murphy, and broke off to glare around for sight of the man whose elbow had smashed into his ribs.

"Boys," said White with hypocritical sorrow, "I've led a sinful life. I'm ——"

"Yo're durn right you have!" came a bellow from the rear rank.

"Shut up, Wilkins! *He* knows it, don't he?" asked a companion. "Didn't he just say so?"

"It was all a question of 'riginal jurisdiction. If you'd took his boots off before——"

"Hang one on Murphy's jaw, somebody!"

" 'Tis somebody *else* yo're invitin' to take that job, is it?" demanded Murphy. "Anybody that don't——"

"Shut up!"

"As I just admitted," continued George White, "I'm hardly qualified to say any prayers, so I won't tackle none. I'll just say that Tom Walters was my friend, an' yore friend, an' that he died like he lived: with his boots on!"

"If you'd took 'em off before he died, I'd say lave 'em off; but seein' thot they——*Who you kickin'?*"

"Shut up!" came a rumbling chorus.

"Shut up me eye!" said Murphy. "It was all a question av 'riginal jurisdiction. If you'd 'a' took his—ah, *ha*! So *yo're* th' laddybuck wit' th' elbow, huh?" His wild swing missed by a foot, and the ensuing flurry soon ceased with Murphy surrendering to overwhelming numbers.

Paso Frank now stepped forward to the edge of the grave and took his turn in the limelight, realizing that his rival had made a favorable impression upon the electorate.

"Boys," he said, quickly, nervously, "yo're performin' th' last, sad rites for an old friend. Yo're goin' to miss him——"

"That Johnny hombre didn't miss him!" said a thick voice from the crowd. "You could cover 'em both with a silver dollar!"

"Where *is* Johnny?" asked another.

"Shut up!"

"Johnny ain't here. Keep on a-goin', Paso."

"As I was sayin'," continued the speaker, "yo're goin' to miss Tom Walters a lot as time goes on. If you'll just bow yore heads with me, boys: Lord, give Tom Walters a fresh deck, a fair cut, and a square deal. Amen."

"I'd 'a' been in favor of plantin' him barefoot, if you'd took his boots off before he——"

"Somebody choke that durn Mick!" shouted an angry mourner.

"Here, Murphy! Here's a flask, an' it's near full," said another, with a better understanding of the situation. It was passed along toward Murphy, but when it reached that person it was empty; but before he could make known his opinion, Paso Frank flung up an arm and shouted an invitation to drink which resulted in a stampede.

The strangers, lagging behind naturally enough, drew closer together and became a compact group, eager to seize upon this opportunity for an exchange of words.

It was Bill who spoke first. "Dave," he said, as the two men fell into step, "trouble is fixin' to bust loose. If she does bust, an' we have time to make th' play, we got to get into th' general store. It's thick adobe, it's got extra strong doors an' window shutters, an' it's stocked plumb full of grub an' ca'tridges. Remember: head for th' store, first thing, if trouble breaks loose."

"Right," said Dave. "What about water?"

"There's a hogshead plumb full of water ag'in th' rear wall," said Matt.

"Step along a little faster," said Bill. "We don't want to be too far behind. We got to split up in pairs ag'in. Me an' Panhandle will come in last. Before we do split, however, I want to tell Matt to head for th' store an' arrange for either you or Johnny to be in there most of th' time. I want a man inside that fort, ready to help from th' inside when th' time comes. You an' Johnny can figger that out between you."

"Shore," said Matt, changing the direction of his stride and going off at an angle, heading straight for the store and for his friend. The others, letting distance increase between the pairs, kept on going, and entered the Palmer House two at a time.

XVIII

IN BULLTOWN the eastbound arrived with its usual puffing and roaring, and squealing and clanking of iron. While the engines were being changed and the boxes examined, the marshal of Bulltown and a slender stripling of a youth stood near the steps of the smoking car. On the far side of the limited stood a westbound freight, its crew idling until they got their orders and the switch light changed.

"You've been right all along, Bat," said the Kid, voluntarily. "Th' place for me, right now, is with th' old folks; an' I knew it, too, only I was ornery an' weak. Reckon it was just kinda because I couldn't get started thinkin' along th' right track; but I'm straightened out now, an' I'll shore be glad to see my old mother an' dad. I—I don't know how to thank you, Bat; you an' all th' rest of th' boys; but—I—well, I——"

"Shucks, Kid!" snapped the hard-boiled marshal. "That's all right! This town's plenty tough, an' due to get tougher right soon, but she's shore got a heart in her! If you want to please us, you head East, an' stay there. If any more uncles, locoed or not, stake you to a ranch, you up an' tell 'em nothin' doin'. You never was cut out for ranchin', Kid; not never."

"I know it, now; but it's too durn bad I didn't know it before; even so, it wasn't th' ranchin'—it was that gang of ——!"

"I know that, too," replied the marshal; "but other parts of th' Southwest have gangs of —— too. Take south of here, in th' Nations; oh, well, there ain't no use of talkin' about that. There's th' conductor with his orders, as if he needs any; he knows where he'll meet th' westbound, an' so do I. Drop me a line, Kid, when——"

Two shots rang out east of the station and they sounded as if they were north of the tracks, in forbidden territory.

Bat hastily gripped his companion's hand, wrung it hard, whirled and sprinted toward the disturbance, drawing a wicked-looking Colt as he passed the platform.

The youth watched him disappear into the darkness, had his attention distracted by the swinging lantern of a trainman, and climbed the steps of the smoking car, walked swiftly through it, out of the rear door and dropped to the ground on the far side of the train as the wheels began to move. Casting a swift glance to right and left, he saw the idle freight crew breaking up as one of its members hurried toward the mainline switch. For a moment

the way was clear, and he darted forward under the nearest box car, and was snug on the rods before the operator handed over the train orders.

The switch light changed, brakes rattled, and there came a jerking which passed from car to car as the long train slowly got under way. The flanges bit on the curve, the wheels clattered over the switch points, and the Kid was bound westward, back to the place he believed he belonged, on a voluntary journey to meet death.

Daylight found him crawling from an empty box car on the siding at Rawhide, in which he had passed the last part of the night. He found a lunchroom and had a hearty breakfast, and from there he wandered back to the tracks as a section gang opened the tool house. He was dispirited and lonesome, and something about the freckled-faced Irish foreman made him walk down the track. The hand car was already speeding away, but it stopped at a little box-like structure painted a vivid red. When the Kid reached this place he saw black, corrugated cans of blasting powder under the opened lid; and a few boxes with a bright red stripe around them.

The foreman looked up and around at the sound of steps, and nodded.

"Howdy," said the Kid, smiling a little.

"Same to yerself, lad," replied the foreman, loading a stinking pipe. Around the broken end of the clay stem cotton cord had been wound to make it easier on the teeth. "Lookin' fer wurruk?"

"No; not yet," answered the Kid, his smile becoming bolder in the face of such friendliness. "You short a hand?"

"No; not *yit*!" answered the foreman, speaking unnecessarily loud and putting heavy emphasis on the last word. His tobacco-stained teeth were revealed in a broad grin. "But," he continued, "come night, we *may* be!"

He looked at his gang and laughed, waving his hand at one of the red-banded boxes being placed on the car.

" 'Tis dynamite th' lad's carryin': an' see how gintle he handles it! If I've towld thim once th' stuff ain't dangerous, I've towld thim forty times! But these lads on th' prairie divisions ain't used to it, a-tall, a-tall. Still, if th' stuff's owld, an' has had th' hot sun meltin' th' juice av it all summer long, thin mebby a man should be gintle handlin' it. *That* box ain't fair thawed out yit from th' winter's cold; but they handle 'em very gintle, notwithstandin'!"

"Why," said the Kid, mainly for the sake of saying something, "I allus reckoned th' stuff was dangerous all th' time. Ain't it?"

"No, lad; it ain't," said the foreman, pleased to be able to talk about something he knew well. "Many's th' box I've packed on hosses an' mules

up mountain trails that would worry a goat," and he forthwith gave a practical lecture on dynamite, its disposition, its use, its power, and its handling. He finished with a criticism of the division superintendent.

"His surveyors an' his ingineers towld him there was no rock there," he said. "Thin they found it, a great ridge av it just under th' top of a sharp swell. She was there, all right; an' they either had to git it out or abandon th' idear of a cut, an' run all th' way around th' hill. It is a long hill, an' th' result is, here I am; an' there's th' dynamite. There's th' stuff that'll lift that rock like it was feathers." He turned as he heard his name called, shoved out a hairy, calloused hand, wished his new acquaintance good luck, and swung onto the hand car as it rolled past.

"You'll hear us before th' day's over," he called, and turned to grasp the flying handle.

In due time the Kid bought a ticket on the accommodation for the station nearest to his destination. After a long, hot, and dusty train ride, he swung down to the platform at Dos Algodoneros, and from that point of vantage turned slowly on his heels to look the town over. No one whom he knew was in sight, and his glance swept back toward the corral where he would obtain a horse and outfit; but midway in its course it was arrested by a red-painted box several hundred yards down the railroad track, and in that instant an idea fairly exploded in his brain.

He had left Hell's Center hopeless and helpless, in no way able to cope with a single man in the town, not to consider them all; he would return still hopeless, so far as concerned anything which life might hold out for him; but he would return far from helpless: he would have an army-in- a-box. Now he hoped fiercely, with the savagery of a man whose one purpose is to destroy, that he would find not just one man, but all of them, and as close together as they could get. He now had more than a horse to buy: he needed two horses. Instead of one saddle he would get two: one for himself, and one pack saddle. As he tore his gaze from the red house of explosives there came to him exultant eagerness, and to his face the first smile it had known in days.

XIX

IN HELL'S CENTER things were moving steadily toward trouble in the Palmer House, where confusion was mounting and riot seemed imminent.

"Anny man in th' worruld!" shouted Murphy, his increasing brogue an indicator of the amount of liquor he had downed. "Anny durn man a-tall, a-tall! I'm th' champeen rough-an'-tumble fighter av th' whole durn country an' I can lick anny man that says contrary!"

"Yes!" sneered a gunman. "An' anyway what is rough-an'-tumble?" He pushed forward belligerently. "Rough-an'-tumble! It don't settle nothin'!"

"Don't it?" roared Murphy, glaring. "It settles plenty when *I*'m doin' th' fightin'!" His face and neck were like fire. Drunk he was; but he was still crafty. He read the threat in the other man's eyes, but the gunman was just two steps too far away.

The gunman sneered. He was standing with his bowed legs slightly spread and he was swaying gently on his feet. His right hand patted his holster significantly.

"Settles nothin'," he repeated in drunken insistence. "Settles nothin'! But *this* does! *This* settles everythin', an' right now it's goin' to settle you, close yore noisy Irish mouth!"

Habit which had become instinct was not quite enough to overcome the blunting effects of the liquor; his draw was bungled, his grip fumbling for an instant; and in that instant Murphy leaped, driving a straight left before him. The weight of his flying body was behind it.

They went down locked in deadly grip and out of the flurry on the floor a gun went spinning against a wall. Murphy jammed his knee into the stomach of the man under him, and forced his straining thumbs deep into the strangling throat. "Settle nothin'?" he panted, arching his back to get more power into the thumbs. "Settle nothin' eh? Well, mebby: for it's shore goin' to settle you!"

George White darted forward to grab Murphy, seeing that his victim was being killed; Paso Frank, thinking it was assistance, threw himself against the rival candidate.

"Paso!" grunted White, clinching with his adversary. "Murphy's killin' him! Let me loose an' help me tear him off!" He turned a strained face to the spellbound spectators, crying his warning.

"So he is!" shouted an unsteady voice. "Th' Irish ——!"

The crash of the gun filled the room with sound and smoke; and Murphy, slumping, loosed his grips, rolled off his victim and, glaring red-eyed about the circle, dragged himself toward the shooter. Before the man knew he was in danger Murphy grabbed his legs and brought him down. The flailing gun exploded and a window crashed; again it fired, and a man moaned and slid to the floor; the third shot sent a puff of adobe dust sifting down from the ceiling; and then it dropped from the hand that held it and slid under a table.

Panhandle pushed through the crowd, bent over and placed his hand on Murphy's shoulder.

"Murphy! You can't kill a dead man! Murphy!"

"Another wan, eh?" growled the Berserker Irishman, throwing a huge arm around Panhandle's shoulder; and then, suddenly growing limp, he slumped back across the man he had killed.

Panhandle stood up and looked around. The two leaders had quit struggling and were again trying to calm their henchmen. Bill was leaning against the wall, just inside the rear door; Dave and Wyatt stood beside the front door; Matt, attracted by the shooting, was outside the building, leaning on the sill of an open window, his head and shoulders inside the room. Panhandle turned, stepped through a gap in the crowd, and moved swiftly along the side wall on his way to join Bill.

A drunken bully, whose business was the robbing of trains, caught sight of the swiftly moving puncher, and lurched after him, mumbling curses.

"Where you goin', you —— —— tin-horn?" he shouted, and the crowd, caught by this new development, ceased its quarreling and gave its attention to the new entertainment.

Panhandle stopped and turned, facing the advancing bully.

"That's my business, strange as it may seem," he said quietly, and then he raised his voice, looking quickly at the two leaders. "You've got four dead men now to take care of," he said. "Why make it five, or more?"

"I votes for George White!" yelled a leather-lunged thief, flourishing an arm. "Come on: let's vote!"

"Vote!"

"Vote! I make two for White!"

The drunken bully hesitated, stopped, and then lurched on again, his bloodshot eyes on the gambler's face.

"What th' devil do *you* care about dead men?" he asked loudly. "Dead men shouldn't worry *you* or yore *friends*! Who are you, an' what are you doin' here, *all* of you?"

"Let him alone, Hansen! Let him alone, an' vote!"

"Come on, Hansen! There's two votes for White already! What do you say?"

"What do *I* say?" asked the bully, stopping again and partly turning. "I don't know. What *do* I say?"

"Come on, Ole. Let Panhandle alone," ordered George White. "If yo're a friend of mine, now's th' time to show it: how you votin'?"

"All right: I'm votin' for George White," said Hansen, and again faced the gambler. "How *you* votin'?" he demanded pugnaciously.

"He can't vote: he's a stranger," called a voice.

"That's just what I was tellin' you!" retorted Hansen, triumphantly. "They're *all* strangers: to *us*! They ain't strangers to each other. Who killed what's-his-name? That Bill feller, there by th' door. Who killed whosis? That Johnny feller. Who killed what's-his-name's pardner? That Bill feller! An' now who *you* fixin' to kill?" he demanded, glaring at the gambler.

"Only a half-witted Swede named Hansen!" retorted Panhandle. "Unless yore friends make you shut up yore big mouth!"

"Yo're fixin' to kill—*me*?" shouted the Swede in a burst of fury. His hand flashed down and fumbled at the gun in the holster as the crowd surged to get out of the way.

Panhandle, too, moved his hand; his left hand, which darted out like a rapier and landed against the Swede's unprotected jaw. Thrown off his balance, his groping hand missing the butt of the gun, the Swede was a mark for a second punch. It came. Tex curved over a right swing that dropped the dazed bully like a hammer blow.

"I could 'a' shot him just as easy," said the gambler, coldly and calmly. "He is drunk," he explained. "When he gets sober you can tell him that was th' reason I didn't shoot. Anybody else mindin' my business for me?"

A growl ran through the crowd, and among the muttered phrases were references to the suppositious closeness of the six strangers. The point was being made seriously, and it seemed to have been discussed previously.

Panhandle stood quietly until the rumbling ceased, and then he spoke.

"You," he said, looking a man squarely in the eye, "just said that us strangers seem to hang together. I'm obliged to you for th' idear. If I have

anythin' to say about it, after the killin' here to-day, we *will* hang together as long as we stay in Hell's Center. We may have a chance for our lives if we gang up. I'm notifyin' you, now, that we are goin' to gang up. You fellers are goin' to have some votin'; but I'll have my election first."

He looked toward the front door, where Dave and Wyatt leaned carelessly against the wall, ready with four guns to sweep the room.

"You, Dave," he called. "You just heard th' idear. You in favor of us strangers gangin' up?"

"I was kinda hopin' to fit in with th' other crowd, Panhandle," said Dave, slowly; "but th' way things have gone, I'll team up with you an' yore pardner, gladly; if my own pardner is willin'."

"Second best is better than third best," said Wyatt. "I was hopin' like Dave, here; but I'm with you, Panhandle. We vote yes."

The gambler turned slightly and looked at Matt, who still was framed by the window casing.

"How 'bout you an' that Johnny feller?" Panhandle asked him.

"I ain't got much sense," replied Matt; "but I've shore got sense enough to say yes to that. I'll join yore gang, Panhandle, an' I shore can speak for Johnny. He allus does what *I* do: has been doin' it for years."

"There's th' answer, hombre," said Panhandle, smiling as he squarely faced the outlaw. "White's got his gang; Paso, his'n; an' *I* got mine. We're mindin' our own business, as long as nobody minds it for us. If you feel any itch toward mindin' our business, you'll be better off if you take it out in scratchin'. Go ahead with yore election: may th' best man win."

"Three cheers for Panhandle!" yelled a red-faced inebriate, hoping for an extra round of drinks.

"Three cheers nothin'!" shouted another. "I'm votin' for Paso! Let's hold this here election!"

"George White, for me! Come on, fellers: line up for George!"

"Who's goin' to count 'em?" demanded a man in a corner. "Last time we had a real election we elected Big Henry: an' that fool Swede voted three times! Who's goin' to count 'em?"

"Leave it to th' bartender," suggested Paso Frank. "Let Spike do th' countin'."

"No, you don't!" yelled Spike, smelling plenty of trouble ahead for the umpire. He cared nothing for empty honors.

"Shore! Let Spike! Line up, fellers!"

"I tell you I don't want to have nothin' to do with it!" protested Spike earnestly.

"Oh, yes, you do! What you got to say about it?" demanded a pugnacious outlaw.

"All right! All right!" hastily replied Spike, preferring to defer trouble rather than rush to meet it. "Line up. I'll call yore names an' check 'em with —with coins. Th' pile with th' most coins wins. Ready? All right: Squint Johnson—one silver dollar for George White. Red Flint—one silver dollar for White."

The better man won; he was the better man because he had more votes than his rival. Neither he nor the defeated candidate measured up to any of their predecessors in office, and each was suspicious of the other. Up to now the gang had been something of a unit, but now there were strong signs of factional leanings. Paso Frank only bided his time, and with him bided his friends.

Across the desert a dejected horseman slowly pushed on his way, a plodding pack-horse before him. He entered the lava desert from the southwest. The going was harder, but the trail was shorter; and it was the trail he knew well. Mile after mile he pushed on, sometimes napping in the saddle; and when he camped it was more from force of habit, the habit of resting at night. He built himself a campfire, hobbled his two horses, and opened a can of beans. Half of them had been eaten when a blood-curdling shriek sounded from the darkness beyond the fire.

Startled, the Kid placed the can on the ground beside him and drew a gun. He made no effort to get to his feet, no effort to draw back from the revealing light of his small fire. After a moment he placed the gun across his thighs and reached for the can. Nothing human had made that sound, and whatever had made it would have to come to him before it became a danger. If it came, he would shoot it; if it did not, all right.

Again the shriek sounded, much closer, and the Kid twisted part way around to face its direction. There came a third shriek, half-hearted, jerky; and then a burst of crazy laughter introduced the lean, bent figure of an old man. It hovered about in the sage, just beyond the edge of the firelight. It was very familiar, and the Kid called out.

"Come up, Loco," he said. "I've got some beans."

"Smart, ain't you?" jeered the voice from the sage.

"Come on, Loco; time to eat."

"Ha-ha! Think yo're smart! You can't trick me!"

"Come on, Uncle; have some beans with me."

"Well! Mebby—mebby. Yes, sir: it *is*! That you, Jimmy?"

"Yes. What you doin' out here? Prospectin'?"

"Yes, prospectin'; an' I'm right close onto it, Jimmy," confided the old man, sidling into the firelight. He moved up close to the calm young man, ready to jump back, peered at him, and then prodded him with a testing finger. "It *is*: yes, sir! It's Jimmy! I'm right close onto it, Jimmy; but it ain't nowhere near here," he hastily added. "You couldn't find it, not never! Nobody can find it but me! No, sir!"

"Run high to th' ton, Uncle?" the Kid asked.

"Grades up, grades up higher'n a kite, Jimmy. Quartz! Mountains of it. Quartz!"

"Figger to blast?" asked the Kid, humoring the unfortunate.

"Smart, ain't you?" retorted the old man, his eyes gleaming with cunning. "You goin' home?"

The Kid looked at him quickly, smothered the curse, and silently nodded.

"Reckoned so, seein' you headin' in. Margy'll be glad to see you. Go with you, I will. Quartz! Grades up higher'n a kite, Jimmy. Got to blast, I reckon." He scratched his head. "Ain't got no powder nor dynamite. Go home with you, I will. Quartz! Mountains of it!"

The Kid pulled his hat down far on his forehead to hide the bitter tears filming his eyes. The old man had been "queer" for years, but since that day . . . He sighed, noticed the gun, and absent-mindedly holstered it. *Home!* God!

"Set still!" whispered the old man, and he slipped out of sight into the sage, moving as silently as a ghost. He searched swiftly and found what he was looking for. Again the shriek rang out, and he emerged with his noise-maker hugged tightly in his arms. As he passed the pack saddle and the box, he kicked the latter experimentally.

"Easy, Loco: that's dynamite!" warned the Kid, but without much interest. It might be better for both of them if the thing exploded.

"Loco's hungry," announced the old man, hurrying up to the fire.

His face was averted, hiding his thoughts. Dynamite for his quartz! Dynamite! He knew all about dynamite. There was a fuse, and a cap. You

split the fuse to give the match a good chance. You crimped the cap on the other end of the fuse. You made a hole in one stick. Quartz: a mountain of it!

"Beans are all I've got," said the Kid, opening a can and handing it into the eager grasp of the hungry guest; and then he began to ask questions, patiently. Out of the welter of nonsense there emerged, occasionally, some fact worth while.

At dawn the Kid awakened, drank his fill from a canteen, and emptied another can of beans. Loco was not to be seen; and neither was the box of dynamite or the pack-horse.

Swearing under his breath the Kid ate his hurried breakfast, saddled up, and followed the tracks of the missing horse. There was nothing else he could do: he needed that army-in-a-box. The tracks led him roundabout in a direction bearing steadily in the general direction of Hell's Center, and from their general drift he knew that they would take him around the town on the north. Well, the old man had the dynamite, for awhile; but he did not have the fuse or the caps. To reassure himself in this regard, the Kid felt in his pockets, and swore again: the old man had them all!

XX

THE SKY was moonless, but peppered by stars. The night was, therefore, dark as desert nights become. Two figures moved cautiously through the sage, drawing steadily nearer to an adobe corral, the rendezvous. From the south two more slowly came into sight, heading for the same point. The four men met at the south gate, exchanged low comments, and divided into separate units. Two of these moved in opposite directions around the outside of the wall; the other two, around the inside. There was no reason for this scouting except habitual caution. They met again at the gate, and moved slowly through it toward the center of the corral. From the west came another figure, moving swiftly with choppy strides; and on the other side of the street, coming from the east, was a sixth, also moving swiftly. They met at the east gate, mumbled something to each other, and entered the enclosure.

"*Quien es?*" asked a low voice.

"It's us, Tex: Johnny an' Matt. We all here?"

"Yes," answered another voice. "Anybody see you headin' this way?"

"Not that we know of, Hoppy. We was right careful."

"Set down. It's time we all had a good talk. Things are gettin' ready to move lively; an' if we want to have any say about how they're goin' to move, we got to wrestle it out to-night. Anybody got any idears?"

"Mebby, Hoppy: but let's hear yourn first," said Dave Saunders, speaking so softly as barely to be heard.

"You can talk louder, Dave, if you want to," said Tex, grinning in the darkness. "They're still raisin' cain in th' Palmer House, celebratin' th' victory."

"Yeah; but Paso Frank an' his gang was in th' blacksmith shop th' last I know of 'em, an' they ain't celebratin' any victory," said Johnny. "Looks like th' Hell's Center gang is splittin' up."

"Not enough to keep 'em split up if they are threatened by outsiders," said Wyatt Duncan. "That would be th' best thing that could happen to them fellers right now."

"Shore would," grunted Matt.

"What's under yore hat, Hoppy?" asked Tex.

"First, there are two left out of th' gang that murdered th' Kid's wife—two of th' skunks left," said the leader. "George White an' Paso Frank."

"Huh!" snorted Matt. "Two is only two. Me an' Johnny can get 'em both in five minutes. Go on."

"We've been forced to come out in th' open an' gang up," said Hopalong. "I'm surprised that we didn't have to do it sooner. However, that's fact. There are lots of suspicions loose about us. We've killed or had a hand in th' killin' of the four leaders. When we came in here our idear was to get them six skunks an' clear out. We was on th' offensive, nat'rally. Gangin' up has started us th' other way; an' I never thought much of goin' on th' defensive. Mebby we'll have to. We are only six ag'in near thirty. We are all friends, an' a feller don't like to see his friends killed."

He waited a moment, but in the end he had to break the silence himself.

"We've got th' general store picked out as our fort if we get hard pressed," he continued. "That's all right: that's only common sense, *if* we have to have such a place. We see what's comin'. It's right plain. Sooner or later we're goin' to be drove into that store an' stand off a siege, if we just wait an' let th' other fellers make all th' leads. That ain't good medicine. Siege is slow business, an' right tryin' business. Thirty to six don't suit me a-tall, 'specially with th' leaders alive to hold th' gang together an' to direct it. It'll mostly be rifle work, an' them fellers are as good with rifles, shootin' mostly from behind cover an' over fixed ranges, as we are. Our shootin' places will be fixed, an' easy watched. They can move around an' shoot from unexpected places, an' they can lose five men to our one. You savvy all this?"

Grunts of affirmation answered him.

"All right, then. There ain't a man of us that has an equal in that gang when it comes to Colts," he said, "but Colts won't figger much. They ain't got no plan of action laid out now; but *we* will have, if we're wise. We can walk into th' Palmer House just like we have been walkin' into it: two by two. We can make up our minds to all act together at th' same time an' at th' first excuse, an' act sudden. But there's a better way than that."

Again he paused, waited for remarks. None came.

His auditors moved gently in the darkness, shifting for comfort; but they all had followed him and were content to hear him out before making any comment.

"Take that store, now," Hopalong pursued. "It's th' best chance fort I've seen in many a day. It's right where we need it if things go wrong."

"There's somethin' under yore hat that's goin' to be interestin'," murmured Johnny, nudging his friend Matt, who was having a thoroughly good time. "Go on, Hoppy."

"All right," said Hopalong, grinning. "Now it strikes me that any bunch of durn fools can get themselves herded into a fort by a larger crowd, an' die there, one by one." His voice was becoming edged.

"Th' garrison may kill off three times their own number. They might make a wonderful stand-off; but that won't do them a mite of good if they're killed. Defense is all right when there ain't nothin' else left; but let me tell you that a stiff punch has got a lot more in it than a parry has, every time! Th' whole thing simmers right down to a question of judgment: when is it *time* to hole up an' go on th' defense?"

"I saw one punch to-day that was a lot better than a parry," chuckled Wyatt. "That last one of Panhandle's, for instance."

"Don't embarrass me, Wyatt," said Tex. "Go on, Hoppy."

"All right. I'm figgerin' that th' time ain't come for us to pull in our horns an' let th' other fellers do th' fiddlin'. But to make that right certain we've got to lay out some plan, look over th' ground, an' each man play his part accordin' to Hoyle. Of course, no series of fixed plans can be stuck to closely; but that's where brains come in; an' that is where I'm settin' a durn sight prettier than either one of th' other leaders in this town. I'm leadin' brains, th' best brains in th' cow-country. When one of *you* fellers has got to step aside from a planned course, you'll step *right*. I can count on *that*."

There was another silent interval, and then Hopalong went on again.

"George White an' Paso Frank are th' other leaders," he said, "an' they are th' two that are left out of th' six that we came in here to execute. Now I mean that word 'execute'—it's some different from just plain killin'."

Another silence, and again he went on:

"When th' trouble starts they'll all be in th' Palmer House, if we make our plays like we should. Th' Palmer House has got one blank wall: th' south one. There's one door in th' back wall, an' no window. There are two windows in th' north wall. There's one door an' one window in th' front wall. None of them are loopholed. To be of any use th' doors have got to be open, at least on a crack. A stream of lead pourin' in through th' cracks will make them doors shut, an' shut quick an' tight. That leaves th' windows. They ain't got shutters. They are open windows. To shoot out of a window a man's got to show about half of his head. There are three windows. Two or three good rifle shots layin' outside can cover 'em all, an' at th' same time

take care that th' doors don't open enough to let a man slip out. Even if it happens to be dark, there'll be enough starlight to see anybody movin' ag'in that light-colored 'dobe wall."

Again he paused and again there was a moment of silence, but this time the silence seemed to be electric.

"That gang," said Hopalong slowly and softly, "bein' five to one, ain't worryin' very much about us, an' it's takin' its own time. They'll just brush us off, kinda, if we get to pesterin' 'em, or when they feel like it. They ain't locoed enough to reckon that six men are figgerin' on coopin' up thirty men inside a house, an' keep 'em inside, by gosh, till they beg for mercy, or th' fool six clear out without no danger of bein' followed. No, they ain't *that* crazy, but *I am*!"

"So'm *I*!" breathed Matt Skinner.

"Man, oh, man!" muttered Dave Saunders, a vivid picture coming into his mind. "I've wasted thirty years, Hoppy, by not knowin' you!"

"Growin' old, huh, Hoppy?" chuckled Tex. "Yo're like some wines: th' older you grow, th' better you get. This means teamwork, an' lots of thought. She's shore got to be figgered, an' figgered right."

"It's plain enough," growled Wyatt Duncan in open admiration, "but it took brains to see it, just th' same." He stirred gently. "Go on, Hoppy."

"Yes, it's got to be done right," said Hopalong slowly. "We've got to pick th' time. We can't do it in daylight, because they all won't be in there then. Night is when they gather, an' night is our time; but not too early. It's th' darkness that makes our danger of failin'. We want light enough to see well. That means we got to make it as late at night as we can; as close to dawn as possible. We can't all be there with them. Everythin' has got to be ready on th' outside when th' break comes. Two of us in th' Palmer House will be enough. I'm plannin' on bein' one of 'em, seein' that I ain't a family man. Nobody is dependent on me. As a matter of fact, if it's needed, I can be both: there's really no reason for two men to take th' risk."

Growls interrupted him, growls from five volunteers. They would not let him go on. It seemed that they all believed that he had done his own share already; more than his own share. Tex claimed a place as one of the pair detailed to work in the room; but Tex was ruled out by a few grunts. He, too, had enjoyed more than his fair share of the excitement. Johnny fell under the same classification: hadn't he killed Tom Walters, on the poor end of an even break, and while turning cartwheels? Tex, Hopalong, and Johnny were

out of that job, and out of it cold. Must they be hogs? Couldn't they give somebody else a chance to justify such a long journey?

"Let all that wait," said Hopalong, calmly. "That's somethin' that can be decided by th' flip of a coin; there's more important things to be talked over."

"Flippin' a coin is th' answer," said Dave; "but only if Wyatt, Matt, an' me do th' flippin'. This can be settled by one word from you fellers: let's settle it now."

There was a little argument, but in the end Dave's suggestion was allowed: the other three were out of the inside work.

"I've been figgerin' this thing out for three, four days," admitted Hopalong. "That means I've been lookin' th' ground over. I haven't had this whole idear for that long, but I've been wrastlin' right hard, just th' same. Th' layout couldn't be better if I'd made it myself. Th' town's full of old 'dobe corrals; an' three or four of them are just in th' right places. Here," he said, and explained his plans in minute detail.

There were not many questions, and those that were asked only showed that he was right when he claimed that his gang had brains. There were six stations, four of them outside the building; and then, as the action moved along, there would be other duties and other stations. The part that each station would play was threshed out and settled. The men who would fill the stations were named for three of them; the other three would be known after the coin was flipped.

"When is this plan goin' to be worked," asked Dave, with pardonable curiosity.

"To-night," said Hopalong calmly.

"Well, then," said Wyatt, the soft clinking of gold coins telling that he even then was feeling for one of them, "let's flip an' decide it."

"Too dark to see heads or tails," said Tex, "an' you dassn't strike a light. Wait till you get in th' Palmer House. Th' three of you can walk right up to th' bar an' flip a coin to see who pays for th' drinks. Flip 'em in th' air, an' let 'em fall free. Th' odd man is out." He chuckled. "He's stuck for th' drinks, an' plumb out of luck."

"Good idear," laughed Matt. "Do it right under their noses! I'll laugh even if I lose."

"Yes," said Dave, chuckling.

"All right; suits me," growled Wyatt, arising. "Let's move along an' see who's unlucky. Dave, me an' you have been paired up right along. By rights we oughta go in together; an' find Matt talkin' to Spike. Bein' thirsty, we head for th' bar; an' bein' polite, we insist on Matt joinin' us. Then th' argument starts about who is doin' th' treatin'. Huh?"

The consultation broke up, and its various units faded into the night, each pair taking a different course; but all bound for the Palmer House or its vicinity; the Palmer House, the focal point of the town's activities; and the Palmer House had no idea just how much activity, or what kind, was going to focus upon it in the next few hours.

XXI

"SIX-GUNS" or "six-shooters" are terms true enough in a mechanical sense, but not often true in practice. That sturdy epoch- and history-making weapon had no safety block to interpose itself between hammer blow and fulminating cap, in case the gun should fall hammer-down, or in case the hammer should be accidentally struck in other ways. The weapon-wise left that chamber empty, and thus turned a six-shooter into a five-shooter.

Dave Saunders, whose six-shooter was always a five-shooter, led the way to the street, with Wyatt Duncan at his heels.

"Load up th' empty chambers, Wyatt," Dave said, thoughtfully.

Wyatt pondered the remark, turning it over and over. His guns were fully loaded, as Dave must know: load up the empty chambers—oh, yes; of course. He glanced curiously at his friend, who was now striding even with him.

"You figger on somebody keepin' cases on us—checkin' up on our shots, if we get to shootin'?" he asked.

"It's been done before, Wyatt; an' these coyotes weren't weaned yesterday. Some of them don't know very much, but they all can count up to five."

"Uh-huh," grunted his companion, slowing up. "Couple more apiece might come in handy, anyway."

"Yes. Some folks believe in gamblin' on a shore thing. It might be that I'll get th' chance to burn five out of each gun, wastin' 'em, kinda."

"Yeah; sorta givin' 'em plenty of rope, huh?"

"Yes."

After a moment's delay they went on again, but they stopped in front of the general store and leaned against the wall to give Matt plenty of time to go into the Palmer House ahead of them, not knowing that Matt had gone in through the back door and even then was stopping before the bar.

Spike looked up and showed a very relieved countenance.

"Hello," he said. "Where's yore friend?"

"Just what I was goin' to ask you," replied Matt. "I'm thirsty, but I'll wait awhile on th' chance that he'll show up. I don't like to drink alone."

He let his gaze roam over the room and he seemed to be pleased by the air of tolerant friendliness which now pervaded it.

"Everybody sobered up, an' friends ag'in?" he asked Spike in a low voice.

Spike sighed.

"Yeah, so far. What you been doin' with yoreself?"

"Played Californy Jack with Johnny an' then took a little nap; we was up kinda late last night." He looked around the room again and then turned a curious face to the bartender. "Don't see Bill or any of the others," he said.

"Oh, they'll be in," replied Spike. He glanced at the front door. "Here comes two of 'em now."

Matt turned his head and smiled. The two newcomers moved steadily toward the bar, reached it, shoved their big hats back on their heads, and felt for the rail.

"Where you been since supper?" asked Dave, purely as a matter of politeness. He did not wait for an answer, but turned to the bartender. "Hello, Spike. Panhandle an' th' others of our new gang showed up yet?"

"Nope; not yet. What'll you have?"

"We'll have a drink," answered Wyatt, smiling, and nodding to the man behind the counter. "What'd you think we'd have?"

"My treat," said Matt, quickly. "I was just waitin' for company, wasn't I, Spike?"

"Yeah, you was."

"But I invited you," protested Wyatt.

"Comin' right down to cases," said Dave, chuckling, "it's my turn, by rights."

"Shucks," said Spike, professionally. "What's th' difference? It'll go 'round three times, won't it?"

"Not for me," said Matt. "I'll have to drink a lot more when my pardner comes in, or do a lot of arguin'; an' I ain't givin' him no handicap. It's my treat, Spike, because I was here first. Shove her out."

"Nothin' of th' kind!" retorted Wyatt, without any too great display of friendliness. He was a stickler for frontier etiquette.

"That's right!" said Spike sarcastically. "Start an argument! We ain't had no arguments to-day! What hair I've got has turned white since mornin'!

Why don't you toss for it, an' be sensible, instead of actin' like three strange dogs?"

"You got a great head, Spike," said Matt, laughingly.

"An' I've been thinkin' it was total empty," said Dave with a chuckle. "Come on, Wyatt: don't be a durn mule. We'll toss for it."

"Odd man pays," said Spike in the official capacity of umpire, a capacity adopted by generations of bartenders.

Three coins were produced and tossed into the air to fall freely to the counter, a large gesture proclaiming unquestionable honesty. In such a toss there could be no previous agreement. Spike's bent head straightened, and he looked at Matt.

"Yo're stuck," he said, and reached behind him for the bottle.

"Most generally am," said Matt, hiding his disappointment, and waiting for the bottle to reach him. The glasses emptied, he dragged a sleeve across his lips, picked up his change, and dropped his foot to the floor.

"Reckon I'll go out an' see where my pardner is," he said. "See you boys later, I hope."

"Shore hope so," said Dave, speaking the exact truth. He wanted to shake hands with Matt, but did not dare to.

Matt's elbow touched them both as he left the bar. He followed close along the front of the building, turned its south corner, and swung his back against the blank wall just two steps from the street. A row of tumbleweed moved not far from his feet and he instantly had a gun on it.

"Easy, Matt," said a very low voice, and the tumbleweed moved again.

Johnny Nelson, lying face down on the other side of the windrow, slowly pushed up to his hands and knees, and in that position crawled to the side of his friend.

"Everythin' all right, so far?" he asked in a whisper.

"Yes, except that I was odd man," growled Matt. He considered the task set for himself and his friend. "We got to move fast an' soft when we start," he said.

"Yeah; no bunglin'," replied Johnny, and thereafter the two men remained silent, their ears tuned for the steps of anybody who left the Palmer House in that direction. Anyone who left in any other direction would run into a gun-muzzle before he had gone very far.

Inside the building Dave and Wyatt remained at the bar, talking carelessly to Spike, until some minutes after their friend Matt had

disappeared. Dave then looked around, espied a vacant chair close to the side wall window nearest the rear, said that he was tired of standing up, and moved lazily among the tables toward the cherished seat.

Wyatt looked idly after him for a moment, grunted some civility to Spike, and sauntered through the crowd toward another vacant chair, this one happily close to the other window in the side wall. He seated himself and tipped back against the wall, sighing with contentment, without a care in the world.

George White and Paso Frank, sealing a hypocritical armistice with straight rye whisky, to the good of neither, exchanged a few low words while they watched the two friends out of the corners of their eyes. Each called over to him his closest friend, and soon the four outlaws were deep in a low-voiced discussion which boded no good for somebody.

The general noise in the room held steadily to its high level, Spike was kept reasonably busy, considering the amount of drinking done earlier in the day, and the card games ran along amicably and without pause. From time to time some player, glancing at Dave or Wyatt, would exchange a few words with them and resume his play.

Midnight came, and still the peaceful atmosphere continued, notwithstanding that it was George White's intention to break up the third gang, the outfit of strangers. He was going to break them up to-night, but circumstances were staying his hand.

White had no more faith in Paso Frank and that person's friends than he had in a side-winder, and a side-winder is vicious, unexpected, and swift. It does not always rattle. White was not going to start trouble with Panhandle's crowd while Paso and his companions were on the scene in force; and this was something not foreseen, not provided for, in Hopalong's plan of campaign. White had good reasons for this determination: anything might happen in a mêlée; and Paso was a man to take quick advantage of a good break. The killing of Big Henry was still very vivid in the new leader's mind.

One o'clock came and Spike began to get restless. He had been on his feet all day long, and he was on them every day in the week; but not only had to-day been particularly trying, but he had had no sleep the night before. Two o'clock arrived and found him growing ugly, but he knew that the manifestations of ugliness on his part would be as nothing to the ugliness they most certainly would evoke. Therefore it was with a sigh of relief that he marked the sudden and purposeful movements of two poker players as they pushed back from the table. They cashed in their chips, said their good-

nights, and started for the door, not seeing Paso's frantic but hidden gesture. Paso could ill afford any shrinkage in the numbers of his friends.

The two men, reaching the street, swung to the right and cut toward the tie-rail at an angle which carried them even with the side of the building. They were just reaching out to jerk loose the tie ropes when each stiffened convulsively under the sudden and unmistakable imprint of a gun-muzzle on the spine.

"Up with 'em an' keep quiet!" came the whispered command, and their hands had no sooner started heavenward before their guns were plucked from the holsters.

"Put 'em down, behind you!" said Matt, softly, the muzzles pressing a little harder.

There was nothing to do but to obey, and in a moment ropes twisted tightly around crossed wrists.

Matt held the two guns now, and Johnny slipped his own back into their sheaths, jerked loose the tie ropes, swung into a saddle, looped the reins of the second horse over the pommel, and maneuvered both animals around the south end of the tie-rail. Matt, waiting with the two prisoners, made a flourish with his weapons, and stepped back to see his friend herd them at a walk toward a corral in the rear of the general store, and returned to maintain his lone watch on guests departing from the Palmer House.

Johnny herded his captives into the corral, turned them over to Tex, with the horses as well, and slipped back to his place beside Matt.

Tex, chuckling softly, swung into the vacated saddle and herded the prisoners out again, around the rear of the corral, and northward to the main corral, which was out of sight and range of the Palmer House. He dismounted, drove the horses inside the enclosure, put up two bars, and then ordered the captives to lie down, faces to earth. More rope went on them, this time around ankles and knees; and then Tex carried them, one by one, and laid them against the base of the wall, each one tethered to a sturdy sage bush to keep them from rolling together to work on each other's bonds.

The first two horses of the general round-up had been obtained, and Tex felt so good about it that he was eager to spring to the firing line and take up the position assigned to him.

XXII

PASO GLANCED around the room, swiftly checking up on his adherents; but he killed the frown as it was born. It would not do to let his friend White know that he was worried. He was two men short, and the odds against him had increased by just that number. His glance had taken in Dave and Wyatt, and he wondered how they would jump if a break came. George White was saying something to him, and he turned his attention to the speaker, seeing the tail end of a whisking look of contempt pass from the other's face. Things were getting tight.

"Where are th' rest of them strangers?" asked White in a low voice edged with temper. He had fully counted on the presence of the six strangers, and he had told off six men to get the drop on them all secretly.

"Dunno," answered Paso, wishing that his own men had not bunched up so closely in the front of the room. Again he caught a look on his companion's face that gave him a second warning, and this time he took it.

"Reckon I'm turnin' in," he said, pushing back from the table. Conditions were not favorable for the carrying out of the things he had in mind. He was wondering if it would be a good play to have a good talk with Panhandle: if he could add the six strangers to his own force the situation would be cleared up beautifully.

"*I*'ll tell you when to turn in," said White, biting off the words. "Yore friends can go to bed if they want; but *we* got a job to do."

"Then I reckon it'll take us all," quickly replied Paso. White must think him to be a fool. Send his friends away, indeed! "They're six tough hombres." After a moment he glanced again at the two men sitting back against the wall. "Mebby they can tell us somethin' about their friends," he suggested.

"Yeah," growled White, and he raised his voice. "Hey, *you*, Dave!"

"Present!" promptly replied Dave, smiling.

"Has that new gang of Panhandle's busted up already?" asked the leader with strong sarcasm.

"Mebby it has by now," answered Dave, a slight frown clouding his face.

"What's th' matter?" asked White, jeeringly. "Too many bosses?"

"Somethin' like that. Me an' Wyatt, there, are th' only privates in th' army."

"Yes," chuckled Wyatt, "an' *yo*'re tryin' to be a non-com!"

Somebody laughed and the ripple of amusement ran erratically through the crowd. It was a situation they all knew and could fully appreciate.

"Well, give 'em time," said Paso, meaningly and meanly. "They're right handy pickin' off leaders."

"You mean they've *been* right handy," said White sharply, looking Paso squarely in the eyes. "Pickin' off leaders is plumb outa style!"

Paso returned the look.

"It never shoulda been in style," he said with a calmness that took all his will power to maintain. Sweat rolled down his back and made his shirt feel cold and clammy. White had read him like a book.

"They comin' in here to-night?" asked White, ignoring Paso.

"Reckon it's too late now," said Wyatt.

"By gosh!" swore White, his eyes glinting. "I got a notion! I got a notion to go an' root 'em out, an' preach 'em a sermon!"

"That so?" asked Dave, knowing that the big moment was drawing near. "That's shore a job that *I* don't want!" He shook his head slowly but widely. "No, sir!"

Through him there ran an ecstatic thrill, the thrill of battle. He stood up slowly, still shaking his head; and there was no reason for anyone to think that he had gone crazy; no reason in the world to think that he was ready to go into deadly action against nearly thirty gun fighters—he and his quiet, lazy friend by the other window. For a moment he thought so deeply that White's words were lost, and then he slowly became conscious of them.

". . . an' pervide music for 'em before they die!" White finished.

"You!" sneered Dave. He had slid his feet back along the sides of the chair, and the chair was now between his knees. His big hands were hooked by their thumbs to the sagging gun belts, and he was watching that end of the room, with the two leaders squarely in the center of the picture. "You!" he repeated.

White's whisky-flushed face paled as much as tan and suffusion would allow. His eyes narrowed while he studied the sneering stranger. One quick glance, a lightning-quick glance, showed him the rest of the room.

Wyatt stood between his own chair and the open window, his thumbs, also, hooked to gun belts. Paso Frank's friends were grouped as they had

been, almost breathless with interest; and instead of watching the strangers, as they should be doing, every man of them was watching him.

The suspicion in his mind grew swiftly and became a deadly certainty: at the first shot, fired by anyone, it would be a fight between him and Paso, with the two strangers playing incidental parts.

"Yes, me!" retorted White, but without much anger. If he could squirm out of this and save his face he would be all right.

"Play *them* a tune to dance to?" inquired Dave with heavy sarcasm. "Shucks, man: they don't know how to dance—suppose *you* show us *how*?"

His guns were out with the words, and he sensed that Wyatt had drawn. Wyatt could take care of his own end of the room: none better. Daylight was farther away than he wished, but a man couldn't always have everything he wanted.

The heavy guns roared into action, balanced nicely at his hips. The first shot tore away the lower end of a chair leg; the second ripped the sole of one of White's boots from the soft upper; the third cut the edge of the man's foot. White was on his feet now, his elbows raised comically to give him a needed balance as he hopped from one foot to the other. And hop he did, as stiff-legged as a chicken. Four, five, from the right-hand gun. One, two, three, four, five from the left-hand gun. At the sound of the last shot Dave let his hands fall a fraction of an inch, his expression indicating chagrin.

White's hands dropped like the strike of a snake and came up with each of them holding a gun. It became a cross-arm affair, not in the draw, but in the firing. The left-hand gun blew the top off of Paso's head—it was so high as almost to be a miss. The right-hand gun leveled and swung: and then there came two more roars from Dave's hips. White dropped forward without a bend in his body, crashing down across the table, and fired two more shots after he had been killed. Reflex action is highly developed in a real gun fighter; in the case of Wild Bill Hickok it was almost beyond belief. White was no Hickok, but he was a gun fighter and had been for years.

Somebody shouted, another reflex action, but with the flare of Dave's last two shots there had been swift action along the wall. Wyatt, having the advantage of two fully loaded guns, let his friend go first; and with the disappearance of Dave through the window, Wyatt shot at two gun-drawers, and leaped through his own window, holstering the guns as he left the floor.

Glass crashed along the back bar and splinters sprang from the outer edges of the two doors. Two panes of glass *putted* and flecks from them stung one man's face and filled another's eyes. For an instant the crowd was

spellbound, and then, with a shout, a man leaped to close the front door, and closed it with a slam; another shot out the three lamps and filled the room with the sudden stink of kerosene, which blended with the odor of black powder smoke without improving it. Another man, in the rear of the room, crawled as rapidly as he could on hands and knees, and shut the back door with a slam which shook the glasses on the bar.

They were all on the floor now, listening to the crack of rifle fire on the outside and the spiteful scream of the lead which poured in through the open windows. Now and then the doors boomed flatly, telling that the besiegers were not overlooking them; but to the men in that room this was a waste of lead: not a man was fool enough to open one of them to let in a fire which would sweep along a lower plane.

Coulson fired with a quick, snap aim at a rifle flash, and stepped back from the edge of the window.

"Posse, I reckon," he said, thoughtfully. "An' more'n likely they've sewed us up. There ain't no water in th' buildin', an' while I like liquor as well as th' next man, it's shore durn pore steady drinkin' for folks in our fix."

"There's some water behind th' bar," said Spike, sitting up, his back to the wall. "Not much, though," he amended.

Brink hazarded a shot, swore at the closeness of the reply, and slid away from the window.

"Shore reckon it's a posse," he said. "You reckon them strangers were deppeties, in here feelin' us out?"

"If they was, they did," said Coulson.

"You called th' card, Brink," said a voice from the front window. A heartfelt curse followed the words. "That's just exactly what they are, an' we shore played th' part of prize-winnin' durn fools! They know how many we are, an' that means there's at least as many of 'em out there waitin' for targets. Well, we'll hold 'em off while th' water lasts, an' do th' best we can."

"Be better shootin', come daylight," said another. "Heck of it is we ain't got no rifles; an' six-shooters ag'in rifles ain't what you might call an even break."

"Yo're right! They can lay off at long range an' pick us off without no danger to themselves. They've got it all figgered out an'——*Whew!* That one nicked my ear!"

"If th' newcomers are as tough as th' first six we'll have more'n ears nicked," said Coulson.

"Don't waste yore shots, boys," said a voice from the front window. "Wait till daylight, when you can see somethin' to shoot at."

"Them flashes are plainer to shoot at now than anythin' we'll have in daylight," objected someone. "An' mebby you think they won't be able to see what *they*'re shootin' at, in daylight! Wish I had a rifle!"

The man at the front window laughed grimly.

"There's one out here, opposite me, that you might get," he said. "It's a buffaler gun by th' sound of it, or a young cannon."

"Gimme a bucket, Spike," said Coulson. "That well is only twenty feet away, an' mebby I can crawl out to it. It'll be gettin' light right soon," he explained.

"Good idear," said another. "We'll cover you as good as we can."

"Don't you do nothin' like that!" expostulated the water volunteer in a panic. "You act just like you been actin', all of you!"

"Reckon that's best," replied Coulson. "Git me that bucket, Spike!"

The bartender complied, and the volunteer moved toward the back door. He opened it slowly, very slowly, being careful to crouch behind solid wall while he did so. The crack grew steadily and his hand stopped. He waited for a moment, dropped flat on his stomach, and slid out through the opening, pushing the bucket before him. Nothing happened and he wriggled over the sill onto the ground outside. Then the bucket said *spang* and jerked in his grasp, and he pivoted on his stomach like a turntable and got back through the opening with speed and eagerness.

"Starlight, shinin' on th' bottom of that tin pail," suggested a friend. "Spike, you got a wooden bucket?"

"Yeah; but it's heavier," said Spike.

"I wish it was *thicker*," laughed the volunteer. "Be bad to try it ag'in so soon, I reckon; but if I don't, then we got to wait till to-morrow night. *Hey!*" he exclaimed, as a sudden thought struck him. "Somebody else try it this time; I've done took *my* turn at it!"

"Well, I'll take a try at it myself," said Spike suddenly. "Lemme by."

Flat on the floor, like a drifting shadow he faded through the door, was swallowed up in the darkness.

Minutes passed. Men began to murmur curiously, then angrily. Someone among those inside lay down and poked his head cautiously through the

doorway. A second later he pulled himself back, dragging something after him, and uttered an oath.

"Blast it, here's the bucket—an' water in it. But where the blazes is Spike?"

From the dark outside, and some distance away, rose Spike's voice. "I'm out here—an' durn well going to stay out here. You fellows in there are no better'n rats in a trap—an' I don't figger on bein' inside there with you when the trap's sprung. *Adiós*, fellers!"

"Run out on us, huh?" Curses, shouts of rage rose inside the Palmer House. "Shoot him! Kill the yellow rat—!" A dozen bullets ripped through the darkness toward where Spike's voice had sounded.

But the cunning Spike had already moved. A little later his voice sounded again, farther away, lifted in an anxious call. "Panhandle! Bill!—Don't shoot. It's me—Spike. I'm comin' in, an' I ain't got a gun on me."

Again a roar broke from the besieged, and another shower of bullets sought the recreant bartender. Then silence fell, to be broken after a moment by Coulson's querulous voice. "Anyway, we got the water. Gimme a drink—I'm burnin' up!"

"We're on rations," said Brink sternly. "Half a glass a man; an' only *once* around!"

"All right: I'll take mine now."

Coulson swore suddenly as a bright thought struck him, and his exclamation made him the focus of attention.

"I got out, an' got back, didn't I?" he demanded hurriedly. "Well, what does that tell you hombres? Why can't we *all* get out, single file an' not too close together? If that feller out there had seen me he'd 'a' shot, wouldn't he?"

"You've named it, Coulson!"

"We got to move rapid, before it gets any lighter!"

"Come on! Let them coyotes watch th' buildin'! We can take 'em from behind an' get 'em half cleaned up before they know we're out!"

The door opened again, slowly, gently; and Coulson slid through, a friend close at his heels to follow in turn. There came the sharp crack of a rifle in the dry-wash, Coulson groaned, twitched, and lay still.

"Hit you, Coulson?" anxiously asked the friend, reaching out a hand to touch Coulson's ankle. "Did he? By gosh, he *did*! Coulson's dead!"

"Close that door!" cried a man who had carelessly moved in front of the crack and stepped into two streaming bullets before he could stop himself. "Either push him through or pull him in, but *close that door*!"

A voice sounded from the dry-wash in a short lull of rifle fire.

"I let you get th' water because I figgered it didn't amount to nothin'," called Panhandle; "but I'll shoot every durn thief that tries any more of that!" Two more shots screamed their arrival, but the last one found solid wood. The door was shut, and would remain so.

XXIII

WHEN DAVE and Wyatt leaped through the windows they ran straight back from the building, skirting the well and avoiding the scattered piles of rubbish as best they could. Breathless, they dipped down into a shallow gully, followed it for a score of paces, and then dropped into the main wash, where they were shielded by its high, perpendicular walls.

A friendly voice hailed them, a voice calm enough, but giving some small hint, despite the speaker's efforts to the contrary, of a great relief over their safety.

"Yo're welcome! Sounds like you touched somethin' off, back there."

"Yeah, reckon mebby we did," panted Dave, walking toward the hidden speaker, and peering close to get his identity. "George White got to talkin' about dancin', which he did. He did it right well for an awkward man. He figgered my gun held five shots, but he figgered wrong. He dropped Paso Frank, figgerin' that Paso was more dangerous than me because his guns were loaded; an' then he swung on me; but I was savin' two shots for him, an' delivered 'em. Wyatt, here, blew hell outa anythin' he could see. You sound like Tex, and you oughta be Tex."

"Yeah, I am. So th' slate's wiped clean, huh? Got all six."

"Slick as a greasy skillet," said Wyatt. "You never saw so many surprised hombres in all yore born days. Them that wasn't plumb numb was lickin' their lips when Dave was wastin' ammunition which was goin' to be valuable; an' then their cinches busted, an' when they picked themselves up we wasn't there."

Tex chuckled, his eyes on the vague spot which was the back door of the Palmer House.

Wyatt cocked his head, listening curiously.

"Who's usin' that Sharps cannon?" he asked, grinning in the darkness. "Ever' so often I hear a buffaler gun roar out over th' general racket, an' it roars kinda reg'lar."

"That's Hoppy," answered Tex, and he hesitated for an instant, and when he spoke it was with reluctance. "He's got a job that he hates like poison. It's so rotten mean that he wouldn't pass it on to nobody else, which is his way. If there's any man in this whole country who hates to hurt a hoss, that man's Hoppy. He's got th' dirty job of killin' them hosses at th' tie-rails. There

must be twenty of 'em; an' that means twenty mad, tough hombres chasin' us across country that they know better than we do. Th' hosses have to go. He's layin' as close as he can get to 'em, tryin' his durnedest to kill clean with each shot."

Dave grimaced in the darkness, glad that somebody else was doing that shooting, and knowing that it was shooting that had to be done; but he did not know the resourcefulness of the old, limping redhead who had mourned the acceptance of that job. He did not know that the horses were not being killed.

"What about th' hosses in town, th' other hosses?" asked Dave, beginning to breathe with more regularity. "We still got that job?"

"Yes, you have," answered Tex. He raised his shoulder, dropped his cheek against the smooth walnut stock of his rifle, and sent another slug into the rear door as a matter of routine. He listened for the sound of impact: it came instantly, and was that made by lead on wood. He grunted his satisfaction: the door was shut.

"We're all at our stations now," he said, looking up as he pumped the lever. "We're only waitin' for you to get th' loose hosses, an' for them tie-rails to be cleared. Then we pull out, an' no more Hell's Center. Th' job is done."

"Come on, Wyatt," said Dave, turning on his heel. "We still got a little time before dawn, an' if we move rapid we can rustle off every head of ridin' stock in town. Lucky we know just where to look for 'em. Our own hosses where they oughta be? Yeah? Come on, Wyatt, so-long, Tex."

"So-long," grunted Tex, his gaze returning to the rear door.

Here and there around the building, except on its blind south side, he could see the occasional flash of rifles, indicating where his friends were holed up behind thick, adobe walls. While Dave and Wyatt had played their own parts in the Palmer House that night, their friends had been busily engaged in cutting loopholes in the more strategic corrals, and in getting everything in readiness for the storm.

Tex could picture the three of them, holed up safely and keeping a score and a half of desperadoes within the confines of four walls. It took Hopalong to think of such a ridiculous and yet simple plan. He chuckled and fired again, and the sound of lead on wood came back to him. From out in front of the building came the roar of the great buffalo gun, Hopalong's .45-120-550. How that gun did shoot!

Hopalong, lying prone behind a desert-varnished boulder, fired three shots of his Colt through the front window, and then hitched still closer to the store. Not a horse had been hit, so far, to his great relief: and he hoped that none would be hit. Why couldn't he find the mark he was trying so hard for? The gun was powerful enough to do the work if he could see the small mark he was searching for. There seemed to be a thin and darker streak along the darker band of shadow. Again he sent a few shots through the window, and wormed ahead another half dozen feet. If daylight caught him where he was he would be in a proper fix. Ah! Was *that* a thin, gray line? Was *that* the glint of starlight on sun-bleached wood? If it was, he had been shooting too high. Was—yes, by gad, it was!

He slid the rifle forward, planted himself firmly, exhaled a little, steadied and then gently, oh so gently, squeezed the trigger of the gun. The sound of impact bounded back to him, but it was so closely merged in the thunder of the report that he was doubtful. Still, it sounded different from those others which had struck adobe. This time the left-hand Colt spat swiftly at the window; and again the Sharps, reloaded, slid forward and steadied. The roar smashed back at him from the wall of the building, but this time he caught the sheen of a silvery-white splinter as it sprang into the air.

He sighed with relief and reloaded. He was on the target at last, and now it would be only a matter of moments. Again the great gun crashed, and the almost hidden tie-rail cracked in two, the frantic horses, plunging and rearing, ripped the fastened ends from the posts, and were free. Hoofs thundered down the street, the noise sufficient to let Dave and Wyatt know that their job had grown. The happy marksman now swung the rifle on the second tie-rail, and he found this one easier, for he had the range to an inch. Three shots broke it, and again the surging horses tore free and stampeded down the street.

There was no reason to waste another moment in so precarious a position. So far all the shots fired at him had missed; but there was no telling when one of them would make a hit. He would leave the front of the building to Matt's enfilading fire. He wriggled backward, dragging the big rifle after him, and not long thereafter he was back where he had started from, on the safe side of a ridge of sand and gravel. He moved along it, crossed the street farther up, and swung back toward the Palmer House, stopping at the first position.

"You makin' out all right?" he asked, after he had answered the sharp challenge.

"Yeah," replied Matt, chuckling. "Right well. What happened to them hosses?" he asked, curiously. He fired again, pumped the lever, and looked up.

"Didn't have th' heart to kill 'em, an' didn't have to," answered Hopalong, smiling gratefully. "Managed to shoot th' tie-rails in two, an' th' hosses did th' rest."

"Did, huh? Well, that's an idear that I'll put away for future reference," said Matt, reverently. "Live an' learn, live an' learn. Hoppy, yo're a ring-tailed, diamond-studded old lizard. *Listen!*"

It was the anxious hail of the bartender Spike that they had just heard, followed by the furious volley from the besieged Palmer House.

Hopalong raised his own voice in answer.

"This way, Spike—an' keep under cover. I'm takin' you at your word; but if you are up to any tricks, may the Lord have mercy on your soul!"

A moment or two later there was the scuffle of feet, and a vague figure loomed out of the night. It was Spike. Very nonchalantly, easily he told his story; no one, listening, would have thought that here was a man talking for his life.

When he had finished, Hopalong was silent for a moment. "You've been in with a bunch of human rats, and you're probably no better than you should be. But if I was sure you had nothing to do with killing that woman ——"

"I'm tellin' you I hadn't," said Spike earnestly. "I wasn't even along, but I heard about it later. The old fellow that had that little ranch—the Kid's uncle—was always a mysterious old coot. And one day a nugget fell out of his pocket right in front of some of Big Henry's gang. Big Henry was sure he had found a lot of gold and had it hid somewhere around that 'dobe, and that he'd slipped the news on to this Kid and his wife. Loco was always prowlin' 'round there too, which made Big Henry all the surer. So Big Henry and some of the worst ones went up there that night to try to make them two young 'uns tell where it was. He picked the girl because he knew torturing her was the surest way to make her husband talk if he knew. But I don't reckon neither of 'em knew—they never told, an' the girl died. Maybe there wasn't any gold, except that one nugget."

"So that was it! I thought it'd be something like that," Hopalong was silent for a moment. "Well, Spike, I reckon you've saved your skin. But I'd advise you to get—an' git as far an' as quick as you can in two seconds. An'

let this be a lesson to you—don't never nest up with a lot of human rats in future."

Spike grunted. A second later the sound of his footsteps, diminishing rapidly, testified that he had taken Hopalong's advice fully to heart.

Hopalong and Matt both laughed.

Again came the crash of Tex's gun bellowing into the night as it hurled its heavy bullets into the Palmer House door.

"That's Tex, tellin' 'em to stay in outa th' rain," chuckled Matt. "How's Dave an' Wyatt makin' out?"

"Don't know; but I will know right soon," replied Hopalong, and faded from Matt's sight.

Johnny looked up. He had not challenged because he knew the familiar, limping step.

"What happened to them hosses?" he asked.

"I cut th' tie-rails with th' Sharps, an' they got away. Didn't have to shoot any of 'em: not a single one."

"I got to report that Tex is hobnobbin' with th' enemy," said Johnny with a short laugh. "He just made one of 'em a present—.45 slug, round end first." He chuckled softly. "There's two fellers in there that have got a couple of mine, judgin' by th' swearin'."

"I wouldn't be a heap sur——*Listen!*" said Hopalong sharply; and the sounds of many hoofs came to them from somewhere back of Tex's position.

"Dave an' Wyatt!" grunted Johnny.

"Yes! It shore didn't take 'em long to round up th' two bunches I turned loose from th' rails. They're headin' 'em up for th' corral."

"It won't be long, then," replied Johnny with satisfaction. "You figger on drivin' 'em out onto th' desert an' turnin' 'em loose, or herdin' 'em ahead of us?"

"Some of them hosses are grain-fed, an' might wander back here," said Hopalong. "We'll drive 'em ahead of us. That's th' shorest way."

"Suits me; suits me right down to th' ground! Let them filthy coyotes hoof it out, like they made th' Kid. Wonder where he is, anyhow?"

"Bulltown, like as not, seein' I ain't sent no word to Bat about him."

"Well, we shore can tell him that his slate's clean," said Johnny.

"It won't be long now, Kid," said Hopalong, moving away. "I'll find Dave and Wyatt an' see how things stand. So-long. Remember, now: our

cayuses are at that little corral, acrost th' street. When you hear me shoot three times rapid, you slide outa here an' get to th' hosses."

"I ain't forgettin' nothin', not a durn thing," said Johnny, and he forthwith gave his entire attention to his particular window.

XXIV

HOPALONG MOVED on, bound for the rear of the Palmer House and Tex. When he drew near to his friend he heard Tex challenge sharply, which surprised him: he had had no thought that he could be seen; and then to his utter amazement he heard a strange voice reply; but was it a strange voice? Somehow it sounded familiar.

"*Quien es?* Who th' blazes are you?" demanded Tex. "Hold 'em high an' keep a-comin', *both* of you!" His voice was tense and hard. "One false move an' yo're done! *Come on!*" Then Tex heard a slight sound behind him, and twisted sideways, but a reassuring voice sent him twisting back again.

"Keep a-comin', pronto!" ordered Hopalong, now at Tex's side. "Good grief! It's th' *Kid*! An' Loco!"

"All right: you can drop 'em," said Tex, and instantly turned his attention to the rear door of the Palmer House.

"What th' blazes you doin' out here?" demanded Hopalong, reaching out and gripping the Kid's shoulder. "Spit it out, Kid! What you doin' here?"

He listened to the swift and broken recital, a recital which left much out, but enough was told to make Hopalong's face soften: the Kid had come back to square accounts, and to die.

"You say you've got some dynamite?" he asked swiftly. "Where is it? Yeah? Gimme th' fuse an' caps, an' you take Loco up to th' big corral just over th' ridge beyond th' blacksmith shop. Pick out a couple of saddled hosses an' wait there. Most of them hosses are fresh. We're pullin' out right soon, an' yo're goin' with us. Keep yore eye on Loco: we won't have time to go lookin' for anybody. Understand?"

He watched the two disappear into the night, and then turned to Tex. He was smiling grimly.

"There's more stuff in th' Kid than I figgered," he admitted. "Come back here to kill all he could, an' die! With dynamite, no less!"

Tex fired, pumped the lever, and looked up.

"We're shore goin' to make a cleaner job of Hell's Center than we figgered on," continued Hopalong. "I'll be back inside of ten minutes, an' when I come I'll come fast. I'll bring th' Kid's hosses with me. Be ready to join me, Tex."

Tex saw him melt away, and resumed his watch on the back door, firing one shot at it as casual information that it had not been forgotten.

Hopalong hurried to where he had been told he would find the horses and the dynamite. The box was there, lying on the ground, and the two horses had begun to stray. If he couldn't catch the animals he would have to shoot them; but they were not at all skittish, and he soon had them and led them to a sage bush, where he tied them securely and then hurried back to the box.

In another moment he was carrying it toward the blank wall of the Palmer House. He reached his objective in safety, smashed in the cover of the box with a Colt, and worked rapidly with the deadly little sticks. He dug a hole in the end of one of them and placed the stick aside. Taking the coil of fuse from his pocket, he measured it to the required length by spans of his hand, cut it off, split one end of it into four pieces with his knife, and then, capping the other end by crimping the cap on with his teeth, shoved this end of the fuse into the hole he had made in the stick. He was working swiftly, and in another moment the sticks were piled against the adobe wall, the capped cartridge in the middle of the pile. He looked quickly around. There were some large, flat rocks close by, and he hastened to them. They would serve as weights to give the dynamite the added power of a kick-back. He had no time to make a better blanket, but the rocks would do nicely.

Scurrying from the Palmer House with the rest of the sticks, he slipped up close to the wall of the general store and again worked at top speed. He was glad that the storekeeper did not sleep on the premises, for he wanted every man to have a chance, at least, for his life. This fuse was cut a little longer than the other. He lit it and ran at top speed to the mine he had placed against the Palmer House, lit that, and then dashed away to get the horses and pick up Tex. Already a pale streak in the eastern sky warned him that time was getting short.

"Come on, Tex!" he cried when he reached the wash. "Down th' wash after me! There's two twenty-five pound charges of dynamite due to go off in about seven minutes. I'll get them two hosses an' head straight for th' corral. You hustle th' rest of th' boys there as fast as you can!"

Soon the sounds of galloping horses passed around behind the Palmer House and circled around to the firing line, stopping at the main corral. Hopalong swung down from the saddled horse and called out sharply.

Dave Saunders came up at a run, followed closely by his friend Wyatt.

"All right, boys," said Hopalong, bending swiftly over one of the prisoners taken by Matt and Johnny. His fingers worked swiftly at the ropes.

"Herd them hosses ahead of us on th' Tinaja Verde trail. Here comes Johnny: he didn't wait for th' signal. He'll help you. Fire three quick shots for Matt, an' then move rapid!"

He helped the prisoner to his feet, gripping him with fierce strength.

"In three minutes th' Palmer House is goin' up in smoke. There's twenty-five pounds of dynamite against th' wall, an' I ain't sayin' where. Th' general store is goin' up with it. It'll take you one minute to run to th' Palmer House an' warn yore friends; an' about th' same amount of time for them to get out of th' buildin'. Rub yore ankles an' knees an' get limbered up: an' when I say *go* you GO!"

Dust was sweeping over them in dense clouds as the impounded horses were driven out of the corral, herded up, and started for the trail. Hopalong saw Matt and Tex running up, and shouted for them to stand by the riding horses. He looked again at his watch, slapped the prisoner on the shoulder, and gave him the word to start.

"Go!" he shouted, and as the frightened man darted away toward the Palmer House, shouting out his identity at every jump, Hopalong released the second prisoner, jerked him to his feet, and shoved him after the first. "Scat!" he shouted, and then laughed aloud, as he turned to dash for the horses.

Swinging into their saddles, the little group whirled and raced for the street, swung northward along it and then turned off in the direction of the Tinaja Verde trail, riding in the dust of the horse herd, dust which still filled the air. When on the outskirts of the town and well out of revolver range of the Palmer House, they drew up, waiting.

Already the involuntary garrison of the Palmer House was streaming from doors and windows, and running from the building as if it were a thing accursed. The mounted friends saw the last man emerge and start down the street like a frightened rabbit. In his panic he had turned the wrong way, and just as he was between the two buildings there sprang heavenward a great cloud of smoke, dust, and debris. Almost before the sound had died out there came a second eruption as the general store disappeared. The unlucky last man was blown off his feet, but they could see him scrambling frantically away on all fours.

The billowing smoke swirled and thinned, and what was left of the principal part of Hell's Center stood gutted and gaunt against the still gray western sky.

"There goes their grub an' their liquor," said Hopalong, chuckling. "We've got their hosses, saddles, an' rifles. Looks like there'll be a kinda parade startin' toward San Ignacio when th' sun goes down. Hi! Durned if they ain't shootin' at us!"

His friends laughed in derision, for the bullets were falling far short, throwing up little jets of sand, just able to be seen in the growing light. No one made any effort to reply, although there were two rifles there that could have spanned the distance and with some to spare.

Matt Skinner raised his arm and thumbed his nose at the furious population of Hell's Center; and then, swinging around, joined his already moving friends.

They soon caught up with the horse herd and helped to drive it. All that day they went on, through the dust and the heat, and into the evening. Then the lava belt was reached and they knew that it was only a few more miles to the water hole. At last they reached it and saw, to their utter amazement, a lean, lanky cowpuncher sitting cross-legged on the ground beside a little pile of twigs. As they rode up he struck a match and started the fire.

"Great mavericks!" marveled Hopalong, dismounting. "You been here all this time?"

"No; no, I ain't," answered Nueces, gravely shaking his head. "I only got here two days ago. I got to figgerin' that mebby you boys would have to come out on th' jump, an' if you did, you'd shore head for this water. I allus figger that it's a good thing, out on th' desert, to keep a water hole in th' fambly; so I been layin' on my belly, up there, seein' to it that no Hell's Center hombres got here ahead of you an' took possession. I've been so hot I near drank up all th' water myself. How'd you make out?"

Hopalong looked around and saw that the Kid was helping the riders with the horse herd, and that he was taking a sort of interest in the work.

"We got th' whole six, an' a few extra," he answered. "That kid come back ag'in with fifty pounds of dynamite to blow up th' gang an' hisself at th' same time. He's goin' back East, where he belongs."

"Fifty pounds of dynamite?" breathed Nueces. "Fifty pounds of dynamite, plumb wasted! What a pity!"

"No," drawled Hopalong, chuckling. "It wasn't wasted. It just blew up, an' took most of Hell's Center with it. Piled it against th' store an' th' Palmer House, an' let her go. Let's open th' cache an' get supper ready for th' boys."

"She's already open," said Nueces, yanking a tarpaulin from a pile of stuff behind him. "Fifty pounds of dynamite ag'in two mud walls! Shucks, let's start cookin'."

And they did.